

STILL SINGS THE NIGHTBIRD



Philo Ikonya

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Forethought

The music that plays unheard is sweet too because:

Sometimes, from far but yet so near, a song bursts out of nature telling a story. It hits the air that gives it room to unfold, happily dancing on the rim of an evening on thin and crackling air. This song never fills our ears, entering in and finding its way into our heart, soul and mind. For song survives where human beings can break. It brings meaning afresh. Words that cannot dance die.

I have heard the song of the night - bird. I have heard its stories. In this song people turn into powers forged more by spirit than borders. In this story, the Geography of freedom is a mine of meaning. It is limitless. In it freedom flies.

I have discovered the startling beauty of the poetry bird. It wakes up in my chest, soul and heart. The night - bird sings every night. Its voice is rich. It never knew any poverty. A voice that inspires hope to those for whom lack always means possibility.

Good laughter is the song of free minds. It comes and eats the pain alive in capillaries and opens the gullies of words. And meaning does not drop in between and disappear. Feel the biology of your laughter. See the Geography of your tears.

There is rich laughter where people should be crying. You can tell it is the song of the stars in us. There are other songs, songs of the valley. The song of the nightjar is heard in many places. Some of us give wings to it and it spreads them out to fly. Some hear it with joy, some see and hear it in enchanting people and others notice it in the silence that hides blind in many chests.

When we are small we might just whistle the sound of the song back not knowing the song invaded us for life until we are much older. We talk about it with a certain smile when we are grown up and a laugh that sings with tears in our eyes.

The sun travels fast like an untouchable bride. She grabs her golden yellow robe at her waist, parts of it dash beyond the hemline. She moves undeterred. She cleans the sky. The sun sears the heavens. No cloud dares cover her. She sweeps the firmament on high so that children below may lie under the moon's soft light and not come to harm. She marks her bright path again across the vast equatorial blue sky.

In the horizon, the moon rises gently. First she gleams her soft rays. When her powerful beams strike the ground, rings of hope rise into the air. The moon is now fully visible. She too grabs her apparel. Hers is a silver and white skirt pressed around her waist as with a magnet. Silently stars take their places. The moon beams soft colors around and beyond her. She fills the earth. The planet loves her. She pauses and watches the terrestrial. On the terrain below, people move around. It is evening. Neither the sun nor the moon reign.

Quietly, Wakabi and Kabi walk on. Kei apple hedges of different sizes separating fields throw their shadows on their path. The moonlight does not fail to reflect on each of the thorns. The women's silhouettes come and go depending on the clouds that seem to cover the moon now and then. Mother and daughter know their way. It is as if their feet have eyes for the night. It is safe for two.

Above the heavy weight Wakabi carries on her back, there are loose banana leaves, banana sheaths, sweet potato and yam vines. Some vines almost fall from her stack as she walks. She catches them in time and slings them just behind her neck. They stay there hanging like a green happy necklace of soft leaves. It is a garland for a woman who looks like a mountain that walks. All the animals that live in a shed in her kitchen, the house of her husband Wa Ngai, will chew these leaves, quickly and happily for only a day. The goats were never satisfied.

Sweat breaks from the center of Wakabi's hairline and trickles down her forehead. It touches her lips; on the tongue it tastes sweetish and salty. She wonders why. Her heart glows with pride and joy. Tiredness constricts her throat but her limbs move. Though pain fills her for her daughter Kabi, warmth is alive in her heart.

Wakabi never lost her deep note of happiness in life. Puzzled by her share of difficulties in these times that all said development had come, her face bore two sharp folds of skin from her eyebrows towards her forehead. They looked like rivers of patience.

Patience was a word that Kabi who loved her mother disliked. She felt the weight of the word 'patience' all the time. In her mother language there was another word about one hardening oneself to endure. *Kwĩhinyĩrĩria*. And now: Patience. Patience. Patience. It sounded heavy. When she added that weight to 'no voice' or to 'endurance in silence' she felt an explosion in her mind. She had a baby to feed and school to attend. She tried to bear the seed of contradiction. She kept busy. It was best to keep moving.

It was good she did not lose her tender and curious self. She loved the way her mother sometimes enjoyed life as if nothing was really so hard. As if nothing hurt so much. Kabi was a brilliant girl. She knew her mother deserved joy not painful steps backwards. But here was Kabi, a new mother, repeating her last year in private Kaza Day School.

Kabi had tackled all her two-year syllabus and almost just finished her examinations in Ngirimari High School. Ngirimari was a trimestral boarding school. The school holidays were in April, August and December. Now she was in a city day school, a poor school she was never supposed to enroll in if no one had 'broken her leg' as the elders said. 'Broken her leg?' She walked strong on both legs. Yet, her spirit was threatened. She was often on the verge of slipping into despair.

It was only on Sunday afternoons that Kabi felt her spirit expand and her body relax. That did not happen in the morning in church. The priest preached nothing else but impurity. All the time girls were

unclean. Always dirty. She felt confused. It was at home when Wakabi listened to funny radio plays that Kabi felt relief. She would stare at her beautiful smiling mother amazed.

The big brown radio was precious. Wakabi won it in the first ever raffle in the local township. She was lucky. The fortune number was 122, she picked it and the radio was hers. On those Sundays, ears cocked, Wakabi would slowly turn the dial with her chapped middle finger and thumb. There. Her fingers then slowed down to dispel the constant buzz or *shbbb!* of something like wind in the radio. There. The Gĩkũyũ program stopped. She heard the fleeting sound of Hindi. She moved from English in General Service. She carefully tuned into 198.6, the Kiswahili station. Her favorite dramatists Kipanga, Mama Njeri and Baba Tremji Haji were on. Between her thumb and middle finger she felt the dial's little grooves again. She fixed the volume just right. The dramatist made her laugh at many of life's miseries.

On the program, there was a constant repetition of the words: Laugh with Kipanga Athumani! She would repeat them herself on those free Sunday afternoons in Kiswahili: *Cheka na Kipanga!* Laugh, laugh with Kipanga! She would laugh. There was enough solemnity in church. A fisher waits for the rod to quiver slightly, to twitch. She waited eagerly for humor to pour out of Mama Njeri's mouth. She was in stitches laughing for long.

But now this Wednesday evening, it is late for her and Kabi. It is getting dark. They are still on their journey. Home is not near. A song rips through the quiet of the night. *La la laa ! la la la laa, la la laaa!* The song embraces the cold air. Kabi listens keenly. Again, the first three notes go straight out like a trumpet blast. *Lalalaabbbb!* The next notes flex in and out, and the last one stretches out, like this: "*La la la ã la la la... la la laaaaaab!*" It is a small bird. She hits the ground and her tiny claws shake. She balances on her song as if walking on it. No one can see her. They too can only hear her song.

The song tears through the quiet of the evening again and again. It arrests Kabi's ear. She picks up the note of sadness in the song. Kabi's mind carries many images. She carries them from her own life.

Some come to her from nowhere. Others from stories she heard. Many others from books she reads. The song of the bird pierces her heart. She cannot be still. Her will, strong as iron, vibrates in her heart. She feels lighter. She bursts out,

“Mother, I wonder why that bird sings at night. What bird is it?”

“*Laaa lallaaa ãã, lala, lala, lalaalaaa!*” The bird goes again as if to answer.

Wakabi is silent. Kabi asks again.

“What bird is that, Mother?”

Kabi walks slightly behind her mother, carrying her big bundle strapped to her head with a strong two-inch sisal hand woven belt. The dry maize stalks are tied up together on the two ends. She is carrying them like a log of wood that lies in place on her back only that the yam leaves swing with her every step. The load fills the distance between an open thumb and first finger above the small of her back. Wakabi carries a lot more than any eye could see. You could hear the weight in the edges of the breath that came out of her as sighs.

Kabi always spoke even when she was tired. She loved being listened to by her mother. Sometimes she felt as if her mother was her big sister. Wakabi took her time. The answer stretched out long from her belly to her lips in the same way that tiredness went far into her legs, from the hip to the ankles. It was as if her thoughts were sounds coming out of a deep place: a womb, her womb. They slowly reach her lips and hover around them like breaths, full of the power of creation, forming the first words. She speaks. “It is a night - bird!”

Her words came out with certainty. They are carefully enunciated. The pace of her breathing gets faster. She burns more energy. The burden on her back has grown lighter as she exhales and expresses herself.

“It is a bird, that sings... at night. Sometimes but very rarely, you can hear it sing in the light of day, but it is harder to hear it then.” She sighs. “This bird sings in the grasslands and forests where people have not used machetes to cut all the trees and bushes. Birds need

rivers. They need nests as we need our homes. Destroy the trees, they go away. Rivers dry, they disappear. How do you fly and not come back to a home?" She asks. "We have to plant more trees."

Wakabi did not just sound like a teacher. She was a respected teacher in St. Anna Primary School. And teachers were moral guides, historians, social workers and market peacemakers. Wakabi enjoyed being a teacher.

On the 'Day of Play' - as Sports Day was called - all schools in the region played matches against one another. All the villagers turned up to watch. It was a day of tremendous fun for all. Wakabi cheered with gusto. She would open her mouth and shout. The little triangle at the lower tip of her green and white scarf went below her shoulder blades when she threw her head back. Everyone knew she enjoyed this day in a unique way.

The students and other teachers watched her closely. Wakabi remembered how a younger teacher called Timo looked at her jealously and discussed her with other female teachers. She caught his eye raised to his left at an angle with his chin slightly askew to the right. He shifted his eye between looking into the left corner and down to the ground. His eye then did not look round but like a triangle. Quizzical. His lips were gathered in as if to say 'mmm!' She had no time to care for that, she was older. Busier.

But *shamba* work had to be done daily after school, also after the 'Day of Play'. She had no workers to assist her. Most young men were away working. Some only sought leisure. Life was hard. The labor force of the village went to the not so near farms of Senior Chief Koinange and their children run to Senior Chief Koinange School every morning. The Chief had stepped in to help his people.

Wakabi began to hum. She knew many songs. She remembered some that were sang in secret. Oathing ceremonies. She knew others that were banned. Government banned some songs. Churches banned some hymns. She spoke of how Catholics in those days were not allowed to sing Protestant songs. But she sang them. She felt those songs were more lively. She was not one to question faith

entirely but she followed her heart. She sang the forbidden hymns in her house. She was taught not to bother authority but she always said some things were her own business. That was dignity. And she had much work to do. *Shamba* and school.

She remembered many things. She knew too about other facts that were always spoken in whispers in those days: “Chief Koinange was an in - law of Kenyatta. Kenyatta born in 1894 married Grace Wahu in 1918 or 1919. Wahu was the mother of Peter Muigai Kenyatta born in 1920 who became Deputy Minister, and ...Margaret...the Mayor and then the Permanent Representative at UN until her resignation...Kenyatta’s nephew Ng’ethe Njoroge was Kenya’s first UN representative.”

Wakabi was not bitter. It was her memory that was good. She kept people and many things in her heart.

In these days, she knows of her friend’s daughter who could not get a three months’ refresher course in secretarial studies. She could not go to the Kina College in Nairobi because her ‘leg was broken’ by someone in her village long time ago.

This girl- with -the- broken -leg also had a real limp. She was rejected in Karirũ Convent built in Mahiga Mairũ, black stones, for the Mathĩa Mairũ -Black Nuns- which she wanted to join with her limp and ‘her broken leg’.

The Black Nuns taught by the White Sisters how to be nuns, lived separately because they had a different culture. That is what Wakabi was told. The girl -with- the -broken -leg was now turned away from the college because she was a single mother. A tall girl with a long broken leg and a broken heart she was: a broken single mother.

That year the college was ranked by the Vati Kan among the best. It was hailed for its fine example in fidelity. Its example was worth holding up to the world. Wakabi knows. She knows that girl who limps well. Sometimes as she slept, Wakabi ‘saw’ her hovering around her own house. She decided to do something unusual.

Wakabi found time to draft a letter for the girl with a limp. It was her idea to write to Ms. Kinyata. She was in charge of people with disability since independence. She wrote it from her heart on a simple exercise book folio. She posted it. Miss Kinyata read it.

Dear Miss Kinyata,

How are you? We are well. We send you our greetings.

In my hands is a girl named Symphrosa Onjiko. She has weak legs. She is disabled. The Kina College did not allow her to join the college. She studied in another small and also Catholic institution called Maguta. She now needs a refresher course. The Kina College has denied her entry. She has lost her job. She has a child.

Symphrosa wishes to study Special Education. I am on my knees for her. I know that there is a college named Kenyatta. She can train to be a teacher of the disabled there. We remain hopeful for your answer.

Your humble and teacher servant,

Mrs. George Wa Ngai

She was happy to hear her name called out in church for a letter after *mitha*, the Mass, was over. That was the normal practice for all those who used the parish postal box. It was a strong envelope. Inside the letter was written in green ink and by hand. Wakabi opened it and could not read it at first when she saw the Kinyata name signed below. Yet it was only a couple of lines. Everyone began to ask to see it.

Dear Mrs. George,

Thank you for your letter. Teachers of the disabled need a first degree before they can train to be special teachers.

This girl will need to show her first degree. This is a basic requirement.

Yours sincerely

Ms. C. P.

Ms. C. P. Kinyata

Her signature filled most of the white smooth paper. Kabi showed it to a few people around her as they read shock and horror on her face. The people spent much time looking at the signature, the date and the stamp. It became more important to hold a letter of rejection written in ‘royal’ green color than to have admission or advice on how to become a special teacher for the poor girl. Wakabi decided to always support girls to carry on with education. She was loyal to her heart.

On some lucky days, one of her daughters went with her to work the land. Today was one of those days. It was late. Baby Jugus needed Kabi’s warmth. The baby had become the child of every woman in the family for everything to work out well for all. Grandmother Naana and Kabi’s two sisters were at home with Jugus.

Kabi knew that her baby was like the young nation Kenya. He was conceived violently in a ‘fight’ on land. Before Kabi’s ‘virgin’ birth, the British were hiding in the bananas and other crops, and grabbing the land. Throwing sperms everywhere. Kabi could not have a baby and look after it alone, she was far too young to be so confined. Tonight, all the women in the family were ‘imprisoned’ by this baby.

Wakabi knew her daughter Kabi was tireless when she got excited about something. She insisted on speaking more about the bird this very night when they were so tired. The bird’s song had ceased to be background music and become almost an anthem.

“This bird’s song disturbs me, it says something sad, yet beautiful. What do you think it says in its song, Mother? Do you think birds say something in their songs?” Kabi asked again.

“In our language, many put its song into a question about feeling cold. *Kwĩ beboĩ, kwĩ bebo ngũrara kũ?* This means ‘Oh, it’s so cold, Oh it’s so cold, where shall I sleep?’”

“*Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ!*” repeated Kabi, cheerily. She mimics her mother. She feels that the words match the sad tone of the bird’s song. She sighs. Wakabi looks as if she is carrying a whole

house. Her back is the high mountain on which the house is constructed. A whole nation might live there.

Kabi hears more bird song in moments when she slides the rope off her head and moves it left to right. It is as if she shakes her head to say 'No!' She says 'No' silently, without a word to this kind of hard work.

She loved the song of the bird at once. She wanted to hear it again and again. She longed to see the bird that sang. To catch a glimpse of it, or perhaps she could even let it stand on the raised knuckles of her left hand without touching it so it could fly away whenever it wanted to. Maybe she could stroke it very gently and feel happy. She could not go chasing it and carefree now. One day she would learn that the nightjar also knew how to climb branches and sleep along them, not across them. That the nightjar also heard her.

"You are silent," Said Wakabi

"It's the bird. I love it. I am going to sing like that, sing everywhere."

"But be careful now, Kabi, her mother warned. Some superstitious people believe that animals and birds have evil powers. I do not. We are free. They say Kenyatta turns back if a wild animal crosses the road in front of his motorcade. There are many wild animals here in our land, so he turns back often."

"Oh! What does he fear? Who is he afraid of?"

"And there are others who say that a dead bird left on your land means that death is invited to take you. That you are wished death and that people died after such desires. But you are my wonderful, great little survivor!"

"I love the song of the bird mother, and the bird."

In the basin of the Great Rift Valley in Kenya, pairs of sunburnt arms raise binoculars up slowly. It is time to watch the stars. The brains behind the eyes at the back of the eyepiece long to discover Kenyan skies. The skies are skies of the earth, not of the world. The skies are skies of many stars but these hands want to read Kenyan skies. Fingers keep moving little rings on their field glasses. Soon all

the hands wear the glove of soft semi-darkness of this early evening that transits fast into darkness. The happenings of the unknown things of the night are unseen. The campfire is dying.

The guests with binoculars do not complain. They hum. They speak gently. They have learned to laugh. In the morning, they will go bird watching. The question is not which birds they will see but which ones they will hear. The thrill is not in the message of sight. They are friends of those who live there as if they were visitors too but are settlers, not refugees. Refugees came from Mozambique and they lived in the villages of the poor. These, who seek the sun to burn them, as if to keep it for themselves, are in their vast kingdom. Which bird is not a poetry bird? The ear that hears and keeps the sound is coveted. The eye that sees and preserves the image deep inside is rare.

Seen from above, the rim of the Great Rift Valley in Kenya looks like long green and brown legs, very long. Tonight, these limbs sleep alone on the brows of the high edges of the burning rift. They lie broken and thin, are spread out painfully. White bones. Bones are always white. There is bleeding where the legs meet. Bleeding on white bones that have little rifts of blood. It is woman that bleeds more. Male bones are dry. Soon these bones will be browned by the heat, and burned to ashes. Birds fly by, without a sound. That one bird hears and sees. She hides and sings. Her resolve is strong, her will indestructible.

Films

How could Kabi look after her baby, study, work on land and follow birds? Was this not only possible in another world, like the world created in films Kabi wondered?

Just then a thundering voice cut through the dark as if it would turn night into day. The song of the bird was stolen from her ears. It was the mobile cinema in the small township. Tarzan cries out. The voice of terrified Jane fills every part of the countryside spreading out from Uberi, the only place with electric light in the area. The only other lights flickered in the distant coffee farms. Those were set apart and lonely.

Wakabi had never seen a film. Kabi had watched *The Jungle Book* at Ngirimari school. She saw that the film 'leapt' from a wheel projector at the back and landed on the wall in the classroom. Wakabi had heard about films and heard voices from far. The loud and clear sound drifts in the evening air from the township. Suddenly it stops. Her brother Atia had watched many series of Tarzan before he went to Rome. He and other boys went out late in the evening to wait for the arrival of the travelling film van. Parents said it was not safe for girls to go to films because boys laid traps for them. Kabi believed it. It was not safe to be anywhere, Kabi knew. But boys went everywhere. They owned freedom and independence. No such vans visited day schools to show films. She flooded her mother with more questions.

"Do you think other people who speak different languages have words for the night -bird's song? I wonder what do our Ūkabi friends think the bird says." Kabi went on. Deep silence followed. For a moment, Kabi was lost in thought. Then her mother spoke again, "The Maasai, whom we call Ūkabi, are the ones you and your grandmother are named after. You carry your paternal grandmother's name-Nyokabi- not Naana's, my mother. Nyokabi means of the

Maasai. You are Kabi for we love shortened names. They are sweet. “Kabi!?” She called out for she had something new to add.

“Yoooh!” Kabi answered.

“Kabi, maybe for you this song of the bird means something else. Something like you have to always be a very brave girl my daughter.”

“ĩĩ eh”

“ Ferocious like a lion!”

“Hhmm?”

“I know that you have a will of iron. May you be stronger than fire. Remember the Ũkabi are friends of lions?”

“Heeh!”

“And you are their friend by your very name! Names! They mean a lot!”

“ĩĩ ee Mami.”

The coolness of the evening made the two of them lively again.

“Perhaps the song means I should have claws!” Kabi said, puffing out and growling like a lion. Her mother tried to laugh under her mighty burden. Kabi had never seen a lion. Wakabi had not seen a lion. Kabi heard a lion growl in stories told by the fireside. She heard the growl on radio too, when Joy Adamson was talking to her Kasimba, as she called a small lion, in what Wakabi called ‘*Kisimba*’ language, loving and stroking a big cat. Wonders were many in the world Kabi always thought. Living with lions in the bush! Kabi would prefer birds.

Questions raced through Kabi’s mind. She spoke to herself. She had heard these words so often. Born Free. At first she thought it was about people, that at last the mystery of freedom would be clear to her. But she did not find that. The lion was born free. Free was written across a few lines on school timetables: Free. The teacher and students said, ‘we have Free’ as if it was something to eat or a person. *Tĩĩna firii*. That is what she knew. Why, Kabi asked herself was she not free? She was disappointed that the book *Born Free*, was not about girls like her. Was the bird that sang at night free? Lions are free, so strong and nocturnal she thought. Born free? Why do lions, cheetahs

and leopards fear a burning light in the night she wonders? Their own eyes seem to burn. They feared smoke too. There was absolute silence.

A fresh mixture of fragrances wafted from the plants Wakabi carried, through the cold air and into Kabi's nostrils. Perhaps they could have made a good potpourri, even a deodorant, but that for scientists later she thought. Wakabi was still sweating profusely. She had no time to enjoy the fragrance in the cool fresh air of the evening. But the wonderful air still hit her nostrils and Kabi's. In the coolness of the evening the air went in deep into their lungs. Nature was kind most times.

The clouds scudded above them. The two mothers moved on unaware that the stars up above crowned them with light. They did not know that the stars saw them as stars. They did not know that the bird singing now and then from the ground below, heard them speak and joined in. The ground was cool to Wakabi's bare feet. It was blunt but soft with evening dampness.

They moved on the ridges that some say are named after the violent screams of women near *Kĩa*. Screams that rang from hill to hill in the political war- the fight for independence- these ridges recognize the beautiful heels of women, the feet of them that walk.

Wakabi and Kabi were greeted from afar by the bleating of the goats and sheep. The animals could smell the leaves. They could hear the sound made by leaves brushing against leaves as the two mothers approached. The discordant song of the goats rose to a crescendo the closer the two women got to the entrance of the kitchen. The floating smell of the fresh leaves drives the animals wild. It was strong. It was beautiful. It livened up all nostrils. Wakabi could not hear what her daughters were saying. More hungry animals woke up to join the cry for the arrival of food. Pans and pots were clanging to make way for Kabi and Wakabi. The animals had to eat first before Wakabi and Kabi could. The two entered the kitchen amid this hullabaloo.

Two goats lifted their front legs up in anticipation of their meal. They put them up onto the wattle poles in unison as if they had been trained in military movements. The other goats and sheep look down and push each other in a circle in the shed. Suddenly, the Billy goat's legs are high up on the poles that make the side of the shed. He boasts his manhood, his power to multiply.

Everyone saw his organ unsheathed and ready to get to work. Kabi looked away in disgust. That was goat play. The kids slept on. Then they too woke up and began to bleat. They pranced around the enclosure joyfully as if they saw sunrise. Grandmother enjoyed the return of life in the night. She prided in the sweat of her people. She smiled to see the goats so happy.

City

It is another evening and far away from the Rift basin, but near the city Wakabi and Kabi work on. Their memories travel silently like the clouds above. Their minds move from the present to the past and back. The city of Nairobi tries to spread her lights from her waist. It is stuck. Someone is swearing in Afro-American style. No one imitates our grandparents' swear words here. It is not on fashion to do so. This remains the elders' domain. Not all grans were polite. Not all grandpas were diplomatic weaving words into wisdom.

Grandmas swore with relish and so suddenly, it was like a wind that had to blow past. "*Gaaaaa!*" She says shattering the limits that hold girls back. "*Tigaka!*" she finishes her words to her own prompting. She is victorious. Those who heard her words even when they came in mother tongue did not understand them but they knew they were about nudity. Yet even if her words were naked they were still mysterious. Hers was an unhampered reference to parts of the human body that some called private. Parts always exposed by swear words. All knew instinctively that they were not supposed to probe such words. The elderly one's license, both poetic and vulgar was irrevocable.

But the stars have taken their place again. It is evening. Wakabi does not swear. She and her daughter Kabi stand on cold rural land. A group of fireflies too prepares to take off in flights to different directions. They glow like fire but move like worms together. Wakabi and her daughter work harder, cutting this and that maize plant down.

The banana blades of the tall sweet banana tree are shaking in the slight wind. The stem of sheaths does not stand erect. The pole that supports it needs to be pulled up. The plant is bending almost at an angle of forty degrees from the ground. The whole plant could fall. But the cigar leaf still points to the sky as if to boast. The flag leaf is

almost to the ground. It will rise slowly. It seems to announce that the banana will grow.

Wakabi decides to make the sweet banana tree lighter. A machete slashes through some of its banana leaves. She throws them down near her. She cuts off the male bud. It bleeds sap. She grabs soil and throws it onto the fresh cut. It does not stop the sap from flowing from the banana bell. Daughter and mother have terrible banana sap stains on their clothes. The stains look like those of old blood. Nothing can be done about that. They always try to avoid these stains but it is always the same. The dirty marks seemed to love their clothes. Wakabi is busy with her *rubíũ* chopping this and that. Pulling at clumps of weeds here and there.

Kabi has sank back to her painful memories. A huge inner roar flows like a river on Kabi's mind. She is back there.

"Please hold these books for me, I need to help myself here!" He said pretending the books were falling and he needed to run into the bush. The moment she stretched out her hand, he dragged her in. He stripped her naked. It happened so fast. She could not remember how he pulled her round the banana bush. She fainted for a few seconds. He lay on her so hard that the brown banana sheaths that sagged down and which she had landed on peeled off from the banana tree.

Each second she lay beneath his brutal weight was like a long rough needle nestled in and still being pushed deep into her heart, soul and whole being. She gave one loud scream and then small intermittent ones as he stepped on her chest with his heavy right boot to reach out for something to cover her mouth. He thrust a male bud into her mouth filling it with its bitter sap. She knew she could only hope to breathe.

Hostile thrusting. Broken trust. Ruptured hymen. Hours of bleeding. The end of balance. Robbery with violence. Death sentence. He raped her. Rape of her, of land, of every woman, her.

She lay there as if dead. Then for ten minutes she struggled to get home. She hid under the girls' bed in the dark. Then she got onto the

bed. Everyone knew she had a stomachache because she slept like a comma. Everyone knew he was good. He helped pupils do their homework until they were through with the last years of Primary School, he said. He hid in the open, behind a job, a profession.

He had helped Kabi a couple of times, five years ago. She did not really need it. He offered it, he said, to please Wakabi, his colleague. He was subtle in his words then. He sounded very kind. Wakabi and Kabi never thought they owed him anything, but he filed such 'debts' on his mind. Kabi did never imagine she was going to pay with her body but he knew that as the only currency he took. He still worked with Math and English. He for sure would never give himself in. The name of the neighbor and school teacher who had ambushed her was never mentioned by anyone.

Every moment was pregnant with pain after this. Eight weeks later back at boarding school, Kabi was often dizzy. She was living as if in a flat time and just for the present minute. The future was dead.

Now this evening, she wondered again if he knew such pain as she had. And he? She asked herself. She could not see him and not throw up. She could not hear him. He danced. He sang. He played music forever. He was no stranger. She remembered once more how many months before he kept inviting her to his little room separated from the family house. It was his special place. He told her many times that he wanted to know about her new boarding school. It was holiday time he insisted, adding that there were many ways of closing and opening school. He used strange words.

"Close school with me. I will show you how to close and open school," He said. Kabi never went to visit him.

Kabi had made it through years of school when girls dropped out most. If at primary school one became pregnant, one had no power. No foundation. One had to go away. She had completed her four Secondary school years at Liki Day too. Many girls had not. Now she was at the highest level. She was the only one who made it this far in her village. She was selected for Ngirimari, a national school. She won bursary support. She was ambitious. She wanted to study at The

Kenyatta University College. There she would get a study loan. In the village she was the outstanding girl who had fallen low.

Kabi hears the sound of her mother cutting leaves now. This brings her back to the work at hand. She could not blame her mother for cultivating so well for bananas. Kabi knows that bananas, green boiled bananas are good for the stomach. Babies can feed on a paste made from them before they are six months. Women talk about how well they help babies to grow. They are great for adults too. Good for digestion.

Kabi loathes banana trees. She hates to see the male fruit. She does not like it at all. Not the leaves. Not the cigar leaf. The one Wakabi called the ray leaf. Not the bananas. Not the sheaths. Not the stems. She does not even like the sound the flag leaves make when they flap in the wind. Her instinct rejects them. She lives with this aversion of this tree deep in her. She has too many other things to think about. Still the banana presence takes her mind to that indescribable time. She is back there.

Terrible and merciless. A nightmare. Those moments of rape stood up again in her as they were. She was alone that evening near that circle of five banana trees. That hour of tragedy tortures her anew. The wind that made banana leaves shake brought her back to the smell of freshly cut banana leaves in this evening's air. She had to carry some of the leaves on her back and feed the animals at home with them.

Mother and daughter now cut all the old banana stems with determination. They are working on Wakabi's favorite banana tree, the one that bears long green banana hands, arranged evenly on the bunch. The fingers of this banana remain green even when ripe. Its old brown fronds swing to the ground. Some leaves are yellowed. There are good banana fibers. They could make toys for Jugus, but she will not use them.

Mother lifts this banana stem from the Y- shape ended wooden pole as if to give it a moment of freedom. Daughter quickly removes the pole on which the banana tree leans. Wakabi tells her to lower it a

little. The joint between the banana stem and the pole is strong. This rests the sweet banana's tired and soft sagging shoulders.

The banana tree will not fall now as it carries a rich thriving banana bunch. The wooden pole grips the slippery banana sheath firmly. It is hard work to make the two balance. It is one of the many unexpected tasks. No one noticed before that the huge banana stem lay low and almost touched the ground. By the time the weight of the banana pushed too far in again, it would be ready for harvest. Birds would sing and shit on it in the sun. They would peck its yellowing peels. The banana fingers will be filled with shallow little holes.

Wakabi sees and moves her hand elsewhere. So tenderly, she sets the yam tendrils along the *mūkūngūgū* bush whose short stems support the yam vine. Suddenly, her fingers stop. The gentle laying out of leaves upon leaves is over. She ends her task firmly. She hums. It is as if she prays the yam. That it may grow many vines and strong tubers and remain set to give her daughter joy. That is according to her will. That Kabi stays strong and fertile and happy. In Wakabi's soul, she embraces her daughter's search for strength. She longs that Kabi flourishes like the vine of the yam. That her daughter leans and grows on her is a natural part of her hope.

Wakabi is a fine expression of love that nurtures and guides. She regrets the only time she failed her daughter Kabi. Those dreary moments flash through her mind. This pain never dies. It stabs her heart more deeply. A wound as deep as a rift opens. She feels destroyed. How was Wakabi to explain to her child how a baby comes to the world? How was she to tell her daughter not to fear birth pangs? Wakabi agonized on how she could give her daughter support when the pain came. She told her about breaking waters in tears. Wakabi succumbed to a severe depression. In those days, it was impossible for her to visit her daughter far away in school. She hardly spoke to anyone. When she saw her friend the nurse, her reaction was to weep inaudibly.

In her mind's eye, she sees her daughter giving birth, a teenager without maternity help. Wakabi's own birth canal is torn. Suddenly

she is back to the yam plants. She furiously makes the yam tendrils lie more comfortably now, almost as if petting them. She soothes the leaves and calms their ends flat with a smoothening pat. Some resist the palm of her hand. Their tips are naturally raised. The leaves get bruised along their veins.

Deep within Wakabi seethes with anger. She was like a hooded python even if she could soothe yam leaves. She did that to keep a sure explosion in check. For she was like an angry volcano which first dances with gases gushing within, heat building up. She only needed a vent. She did invent one. She sang holy songs. In those days she had to sing. She encouraged her daughter to be tough. How could you show a child who was carrying a child, anger? She could not. She loved Kabi. She hoped but felt tormented. Alone. But had human nature not changed, shrinking too like the rivers? She could not sleep for many nights. She never stopped working. She was always busy, a machete in her right hand. If not, she was running to school even when she could walk. It was she, Wakabi, who felt pregnant. She who had morning sickness at that time. Kabi did not.

It was hard to imagine the pregnancy months Kabi had endured at school. Wakabi did her best. Kabi's school diet included beans but not meat. She needed help. Wakabi could not call in a nurse to check on her during the holidays. She did that herself. She did not buy new shoes and clothes for herself. She saved for Kabi's proteins and iron tablets during the holidays in August. A hard choice had to be made. Life was at risk. Kabi was in her last pregnancy term and her last school term, she thought then.

If the elders would be let into it to seek justice, Kabi knew, that they would just keep saying that the teacher 'held her and broke her leg'. Was the distending belly she had mythical? She asked herself in pain. Was this teacher who prowled the village at night like the lone leopard often spoken about in hushed tones also imaginary?

If she reported him to district or even education authorities she would only be ridiculed. Courts and police laughed if a girl was raped.

She knew that he had powerful friends who marked national examinations. Kabi would be failed.

“I will make it Mother,” Kabi had smiled and said as she left for boarding school. Wakabi would never forget how torn her heart felt at the time. Kabi treasured her mother’s love. There were many who were despised by their own mothers when they got pregnant while still in school. Daughters were disowned. Some parents forced their girls to get married during early pregnancy to avoid the shame of expecting a child preceding a wedding. It did not matter that they stood to be named after the child, if the girl was not married. It was better not to be reborn by being named after a tender creature. Mother and daughter tend the land as dark and light clouds shift through the sky. Soon they must leave for darkness looms. The past and the present are in the sky in both light and darkness. They are also in human genes. In silence the past dances with the future in all clarity.

But how could Kabi even think about others? Most of the times, her mind was filled with hard thoughts. Memories of her rape burned in. Rape. No one sympathized. Many saw a woman’s guilt. It was even said that women looked for it. A politician said that women smiled and even laughed as it happened to them. He was drooling as he continued to rape the land.

School bathroom

It was in the wee hours of the morning that she knew as the morning of the Biology examination, that Kabi suddenly woke up. She had the feeling that she urgently needed a toilet. She did not even think about waters breaking, what her mother had told her about was far from her mind. She moved to the toilet in the corner of the dormitory without pain. Normal routine, she thought. Urine and....No. Abnormal.

As Timo dances his last one in the city in his first discotheque, and soon after, as he sleeps with two girls like pillows on both sides of his body, Kabi is writhing on the bathroom floor. She is sighing on cold cement for minutes that seem to stretch like the slabs on the floor fast going past her own eyes. The minutes feel like hours. Kabi's is all-alone. It seems like she is on the ground again with seeds of life in slime like on that day in the banana bush.

On cold cement every part of her body weighs heavily on her. She was aware of all her body. Her back felt like a long tunnel. She thought smelt death. There is nobody to help her. Would her child live? And she?

She thinks she screams for help. Her voice does not come out. She thinks she screams hard. Not a sound comes to the sleeping girls. Piggy, the big school prefect rushed to the toilet with her own needs. She saw Kabi's wide open mouth. She forgot herself.

"Kabi! Help! Kabi!" She called out. Kabi's mouth moved soundlessly.

"Wuuuu! Oh My God!" Piggy yelled.

A thin girl with big round eyes whom they called Mowgli was the first to run in.

"Help! Look after her!" Piggy cried.

Piggy ran as fast as she could. Knocks rained on the door of the school Matron. Piggy was breathless.

“Come and cut the umbilical cord. She is dying!” The Matron run with only her First Aid box. She followed Piggy without asking who or where. She cut the umbilical cord as the baby was already out. She tied it. She took off her *leso*, a long cloth around her nylon nightdress. She wrapped the crying baby with her own cloth first and a bath towel which Mowgli gave to her.

Mowgli and all the others stood there in shock. Giving birth is not something they expected to see at school. The baby was carried by Piggy. Kabi was assisted to sit up and take her first steps by the Matron. Luckily the priest’s car was coming up the hill. He was on his way to Mass in the nearby hospital chapel. The Matron waved him down. He did stop. He agreed to give the girl in need a lift but together with the Matron. In a few minutes Kabi was tucked in bed.

When Mowgli told the story of that morning, she cried. At night she could not sleep. Ngirimari River flowed on and the moon shone her rays in the water making stars of pebbles in the river- bed. Mowgli kept saying that her eyes were still stuck there on the bathroom walls watering like rain falling. A few days after delivering her baby at school, Kabi arrived home to Wakabi, satchel under her arm and a baby at her breast. Reality is rough and jagged. It is a hungry cleft in the mountain of hope. It swallows swallow birds whole.

But this evening is fast disappearing. Time is flying into the night. This is a race against darkness. Here darkness thickens fast. It falls like a curtain dividing day and night into two equal parts. The banana fronds are on the ground still waiting to be tied to Wakabi’s heap that she must bear on her back when all work is done. Firewood ready for carrying is lying on the ground. Vines and all green leaves and stalks are tied into one. They are set for a ride on her back.

Kabi’s heap of dry maize stems is ready. That is what she will carry. Partly dry maize stalks and dry ones mixed with green maize leaves are there in her burden. It has been a long day, like two days in one. Gathering all these plants into heaps to be carried is not easy,

they are still moving and preparing them will take more time than Kabi expected.

Wakabi is always bent down working. Life pulls her to the earth. No one can ever see the picture that is framed inside Wakabi. It hangs from the walls of her internal organs in the chest. She holds a wounded Kabi firmly in her heart. Wakabi has eyes inside her breast. She sees from inside there. She knows this story well. The *Pieta*, the famous image of a mother holding a dying son on her lap, is not alien to her. She knows how mothers hold girls in their pierced breasts. She tenderly tightens her connection to her daughter. She breathes.

Three O'clock is a tired hour. The sun's movement seems slower then. But half an hour after the hour three, was when Kabi and her mother started this work. They have worked for three hours and over without pausing. Far deep into the Rift Valley, it is time for cool evening drinks. This evening mother and daughter are trying to rest their minds. They sigh. It is as if they attempt to puff out their tiredness as they prepare to go home.

A sudden breeze refreshes the air. It touches the slowed and cooling earth. When Wakabi and Kabi walked to work earlier their bare feet had raised boiling dust. Now they feel better. The fresh breeze whirls them on. They keep moving to gather more leaves to carry home. They feel their effort cruise through their fingers as the rest of nature slackens off to sleep. Their wills do not break. The two are one.

It is as if they wish to do just like the afternoon that had been hot and tired had done, retire. Exhale and release to the skies the heat that remains after the sun goes down so as not to expire. To let that heat go so that it can change its form and return wet in the next hours, filled with vigor and maybe song. It is getting cold.

Mother and daughter are caught in the dream of the soft rings of power and light that the moon throws down to the earth. A call comes from the moon that they surrender their pain. Extreme exhaustion is sculpted into their bodies. It is so stuccoed in them it has to be coaxed out by the soft moon to leave their bodies. They

have to expel it. This tiredness clings on inside their bodies as if it knows no other form but woman's contours. As if it wants to be in all her curves. Her nerves. They stop and rest for a few moments. They feel better.

Kabi and Wakabi are lucky to be alive. Somewhere in the distance, and somewhere near, there were other women who could not move with pain. Did anyone care? So Kabi and her mother were fortunate. Somewhere else a virgin girl is sacrificed to the river god to end a drought. The girl whose mother's heart is turned into stone is dead. A silent Pieta unvenerated. Wakabi knew many lives.

Wakabi knew many people who felt nothing for mothers holding up children of grief. Such girls were banned from schools, churches and communities. They who sent these mothers away still sang a thousand humiliating *bossanas* in praise of the one who comes. The one from a different culture for they do not see their own holy bodies. Their own saviors in those who suffer are lost to them. There is always someone to be waited for, and no one to give a cool cup of water to the one who staggers and falls near.

Wakabi's own son is away from home in Rome. Maybe, she thought, as many others, he would become a priest. Two nuns living in the parish near her home visited her on Sunday afternoons. Then she had to switch off the radio, but the nuns helped her out many times. She could turn off her radio to hear them. Maybe one day she would get a letter from the nuns bearing the news that her son was going to be a diplomat or a priest. A letter from her son brought by the nuns. Maybe one day he would send a glowworm with a short message. Who was to know? Or had she lost her son? Who was to know? She could only believe what she heard. He had never written to them.

Wakabi, like most people in her village knew that Re Ngina's brother was a Catholic priest. He left the priesthood but the people always called him Father. He studied in Rome at the Collegio San Pietro. In those early years too, he was the Vatican representative of the European Union in Brussels. He advised Kenya. A patriarch was

useful to a first president who was a family member. *Kwĩ beboĩ ĩ, kwĩ bebo ngũrara kũ?* ‘Oh it’s so cold, Oh, it’s so cold, where shall I sleep?’

Kenyatta talked about a church he called *Odbodoko* and he praised independent churches. Animals gave him messages.

Wakabi also knew Father Eorgei. He was a tall and kind man who loved his Sunday and Daily missals dearly. He read from a book bigger than all books she knew at the local shrine beside the church on Sundays. He truly was a Father. He was married and with children. Still when he got late to Mass, he made up for it in the church shrine. He stayed long as if he was still a priest. He read intimately to himself after Mass, eating his lips furiously. He looked as if he was in his own sitting - room in the corner of the altar. Piously he went about his ritual in a way that said he knew what Rome demanded. Then he went home to his wife and children. He was diplomatic between heaven and earth.

Wakabi knows about many girls who held ruined futures in their hands. They were sent away from school. She has no one to blame. People of God are holy. Kenyatta did not come from Rome but London where he wrote and published *Facing Mount Kenya* in 1938. The book, Wakabi knew, was a kind of an unquestionable Bible about the Agĩkuyu. An Anthropological work about one ethnic group for the British and the world to read. Then Kenyatta went home from London to ‘struggle’ for independence. Many in Kenya ‘fought’ for freedom. *Ker Jaramogi Oginga Odinga* campaigned for the release of Kenyatta. He helped design Kenya’s flag. He refused to form government without Kenyatta. Kenyatta’s name carried the name of the country in it, Kenya. The mūtura sausage is popular. Other names remained the soft filling. It was easy to eat that and everything else.

One of the nuns who sometimes visited Wakabi, Sista Mirella, had a small paper-white patch on her face. People said it was a small crescent. She had a face shaped like the moon in the phase when it looks like a sad and blue slice of a good- sized watermelon. She was not so cold. She consoled Wakabi often for the misfortune of having a drunken husband called Wa Ngai, which means ‘of God’. But the

nuns had celebrated her church wedding to a Catholic: George Wa Ngai.

Wakabi's memory suffered. St. George was a mythical figure slaying dragons in Catholic history. King George is a new Hospital in Nairobi. Black people yearned there to be cured. Later it became Kenyatta Hospital. The good doctors and so committed are outnumbered by the in and out patients. People die there. They say that death is also a cure. They cry and sing. There is more in writing and in the spoken word. It is written that Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, said unto Kenyatta: "It only remains for me to present to you, Mr. Prime Minister, these constitutional instruments which establish Kenya's independence."

It was better then to be modern, thought many people. Then some male children born that day were named Firifo or Filipu. Some adults were nicknamed Duke.

"Hey, Duke!" One would hear, "Hey Duke! Come over here and bring me more tea!" Then some other titles caught up.

"*Afande, effendi!*" Duke would say and go running. "Afande! Here is the tea!"

"Thank you!" Exit Duke almost dancing with joy.

"Thank you *Mzee!*" He shouts in the streets.

Mzee, the title of respect for elderly men and rulers. *Mzee* did not get mispronounced as often as *Mama* for woman did. *Matatu* crew loved to call smart young women *Maaama*. They pleased their mean streak. *Maama* was also said of women who had given birth. The woman figure taunted. Now little Kabi was a big *Kimaama*. The 'Ki' made the name sound uglier, unkempt and difficult to place. The *Mama* title of respect was used for Kenyatta's fourth and young wife, and First Lady: Mama Ngina. She was gifted to Kenyatta in 1951. She was gifted to Kenya, the people said as they danced.

The people were told to eat the fruits of independence. They were told there were big benefits of development on their small-scale lands. They only had to dig them up. *Eh naturudi mashambani, harambee!* Kenyatta would shout. "And let us go back to the land, and

pull together!” He had coined a new word that belonged to no ethnic tongue. It was meant to rally all. Its root was from the language of the Indians who built the railway in Kenya. They pulled together and called on Ambe, the Indian god to the rescue, *harambee!* Words mattered in nation - building.

Wakabi talked about the ‘fight’ or the ‘war’ not a ‘struggle’ for freedom. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was her hero. He gave power to others. He taught Math like Carey Francis. Kimaathi Wa Wachiũri was her hero. He was a poet. He wrote published articles. He wrote letters to friends and foes. He wrote to them a letter from Kamiti Maximum Prison. A Consolata Catholic missionary baptized him Dedan just before the British executed him.

The guillotine took him before he could see a free Kenya. Betrayed. His remains remained unnamed and his grave in open words that search for him for he was disposed in dishonor, in an unknown place.

Wakabi knew Kimaathi’s spirit was never ‘lost’. He was always focused even if some said he drank alcohol and beat up those who stood in his way. Many men and women who gave their lives for freedom she respected in each of her words. She knew all these things. She kept them in her heart. She thought about them deeply. She talked about such heroes whenever she could.

Most people who knew Wakabi well before her wedding wanted a sober and serious man for her, maybe a teacher like her? If not then, at least a man who had studied book - keeping or accounts. A clinical officer or a clerk would have been more in line for her. But she accepted Wa Ngai. He fought for freedom too. She saw that he was very handsome. He had a driving license, the only certificate in his name. He had not finished his Intermediate school. The District Education Officer hired him as a driver for some time. He lost that. He survived the pain with good humor pegged on Wakabi’s salary. He did not sink into alcoholism immediately. He got odd jobs.

Wa Ngai was a jolly man. He was contracted by Elephant Beer to order drinks in local bars, sit comfortably on high bar stools, drink

and smile. He was an icon. He was an advert. She married him. It was a new time. Traditional ways were hiding behind a veneer of change. Everyone had to wear on their forehead like a hat, this 'going ahead' or advancement, 'heading on to the now', they said about something called development.

Now Wakabi is calm. She has saved many banana trees. She has taught many children. She has done many things. She has tended the yam tendrils. It is late. She and Kabi had to finish up never-ending work and go home. The two have been back to the land and pulled together. They are nearly broken.

A slight wind rustles through dry banana leaves. Wakabi wipes off some saliva from the corners of her lips. She feels sweat run down from the top of her spinal cord. She does not feel it any more somewhere in the middle of higher back. The sweat runs into her chest where two cups -of a rough dark green *sabota*- are pinned together with a huge safety pin. Stainless steel pinches her. It hurts. It does not pierce her bruised heart, but it could have with its safety measure. Was this not development too? Aid. Assist? Support: *Sabota. Thabota. Sidiria. Bra!* She shifts it to the front removes the pin and the bra. She throws both away. She swore to herself never to wear it again but to let her breasts swing free and sag. She did not look like the woman she was in the morning when she wore a red dress and black shoes to school. Then she was Misis Johj. She and her daughter have been to school, they nearly die.

Misis Johj, they called her at school where she held white chalk and wrote Math, English, Mother Tongue and Kiswahili on a blackboard. Misis Johj taught young ones with her heart, mind and soul. Mrs. always came before her names when written. At school and in the village, they call her Misis Johj. It is George. No one wants to use Afrikan names. Her certificates bear many names. Tradition is sinking behind the new way. Some say that tradition is sin.

Wakabi marvels at her own self now, Misis Johj. Mother crouches low to prepare to heave the burden her daughter will help put on her

back. Wakabi gathers all her strength with feet apart so as not to collapse under the load when it is finally on her back.

She picks and hauls the weight up facing Kabi who holds the same weight as Wakabi turns deftly, and bends just in time for the burden to sit on her back. The leaves fall on Wakabi's both sides and the overload sits pat on her back. She could throw it off and run if she wanted, but she let it rest. On top of this Kabi places a *kiondo* full of potatoes. Wakabi is set. She says it is comfortable and thanks Kabi for helping her. Kabi and Wakabi help each other to carry their millstones.

Kabi's pack is lighter. She takes it herself facing it and then swings it to her back from the ground as she stands legs slightly apart. This load is steady on Kabi's back. Wakabi and her daughter work like slaves. The two mothers then hurry to leave. They share their burdens. One burden is on her back. The other is on her daughter's back. Wakabi keeps checking on her daughter to see if she still manages to move. Kabi keeps on checking her mother to keep up with her pace in this race.

One foot after the other, long legs joined in the crotch, became like parallel railway lines. The women cannot sit to rest. They are wagons. The parallel legs carry them and the burdens on their backs further on each second with a promise of a homecoming. Luckily for them, darkness plays with the moon this night. But that is only for those who watch the sky. Wakabi and Kabi cannot. They must carry on looking down.

It is a silver night. It is both dark and bright. A thin blanket of gray clouds covers the sky. The clouds are thick in some parts and thin in others. In the thick parts, streaks of black stand out in the gray. Kabi and Wakabi see the reflections of the clouds and strange shadows formed by the light of the moon on the ground. It seems that pain rides on the moon, now covering it more, now covering it less. The moon looks like she moves fast through gray clouds. Sometimes she looks as if she will fall over the edge of one cloud and

come to earth. But she is stable. A pattern of the moon chasing darkness.

The moon wins and eats darkness turning it into light. She hides again. It is dark. The stars seek and find her, she outshines them. She smiles. And then she looks down. She closes her gorgeous big eyes. Clear fields of light fill the earth. Suddenly, a dash of silent red lightning writes a zig zag path from the navel in the belly of the sky which like a bowl covers those on earth. It falls right down to the horizon. The red light bleeds across the umbrella of the gray sky. Bright red bleeding moon. The night is still a night. It is full of hidden changes and energies. It seems happy to be. The night - bird sings: *Kwĩ behoĩ ĩ, kwĩ bebo ngũrara kũ?*

The stars above looked down and saw stars in rivers and in all drops of water too long before Wakabi and Kabi were born. They saw myriads of ethnic groups held in boundaries created in the *Kongokonferenz* of 1884- 1885 when Afrika was divided. Kenyatta was born -in many places if you follow the books and the spoken word - a decade later in between all these years: 1893, 1894, 1899. His age group was said to be of 'the hot body', *Kĩbĩu mwĩrĩ*. He was born in Kiambu, in Ukambani, among the Mijikenda and the Kalenjin in opposite places of Kenya. He was called many names including John Peter and Johnstone Kamau and even Jomo which means *burning spear*. Ngengi wa Muigai. Dry bones that would bleed and bleed over centuries and never come back to life filled the rims of many valleys and mountains across vast regions. Still sings the nightbird. The bird fears that her own song might freeze in the increasing coldness of the day and the night.

It is 1886. In the clear fields under the moonlight the sea so far way is shimmering. Tippu Tip's guns can be heard from afar. Hamad bin Muhammad bin Jumah bin Rajab bin Muhammad bin Said Al Murghabi is leaving the Coast for the Congo. There is an empire he must build, his own empire. The people must learn in Kiswahili that to be civilized is to be *mustaarab*, to become Arab like. Tippu Tip speaks and writes Kiswahili and Arab. People will be bought and sold into slavery so that his kingdom comes. Plantations must be cultivated. The Sultan in Zanzibar is impatient for cloves are money, cowrie shells. Tippu Tip pays his respects at the Belgian embassy in Zanzibar. There are many forces to be overcome. Too many have died in slavery. Kabi and Wakabi must live.

Now something unfurls before Kabi's eyes as she walks bent over, and draws her into a little story. She and her mother are still walking burdens on high facing the moon. Kabi is gone with the story. It was a glittering bird that flew over her eye that took her into

the story. She saw that it was silvery blue on its chest with pure silver streaks on the blue. But the silver was the light of the moon that became hers. She heard words spoken in a very thin voice. "To seem to appear and to disappear is life. Like the moon's way. Hope." The voice was seared in her in a way she never forgot. There was a flutter. The bird first came and hovered over her. She saw its wing pass above her right eye and she threw off her rope quickly and silently. It kissed her eyebrow and with that, just like in the speed of a shooting star, her mind flew away. Her heart was warmed up by the thought of love that could be real in her world. Not betrayal. Love as a place to belong. This moment happened so fast. Only she knew that it happened. A creed became hers. An easier life. A better life. Possibility. Not this slavery.

Kabi melts into this moment. Beautiful images come to her mind. A well-dressed and powerful woman. Two strong feet to stand on and talk. Her mother was not part of this. Kabi was in her planet on her own terms.

She appeared to be walking just like before, following her mother's footsteps. No one knew why silence had eaten her eagerness to talk. It was as if she moved in a dream. Those instances of flight, brief though they were, took her to a world full of light, just for then. She felt good. The little bird called her, "Kabi!". After the bird's visit, she felt as if she had hidden in someone for some time. She did not see the bird again that evening, but she kept hearing it telling her different stories. She was happy. She never knew if the bird would ever return. It left a lasting sweetness. It flooded light in her mind and warmth in her heart. It left a smile on her face. When the bird was there, even Wakabi, her mother who did not see it felt lighter. Now the bird was gone. That moment was over.

Kabi's exhaustion runs deep. Wakabi felt her weariness this night. Two legs joint below an empty stomach and a crying womb. It was as if tiredness was planted in Wakabi like a banana plant. Fatigue singing to the wind. It was exciting for her to be in the company of her curious daughter. She did not ask Kabi to keep quiet or to talk. She

let her be. When Kabi was silent, Wakabi was quiet but lonely. If Kabi spoke, she would listen and answer. A good teacher. When Wakabi spoke, she commanded the ear, ever so magically. Kabi heard her right in her heart. Kabi felt alive to all the creatures of the night and of the mind. Then Wakabi thought that perhaps tiredness would leave her if she spoke.

“Your grandmother speaks Giũkabi. The fights we read about in history are just that. Ũkabi and us. We fought and made up. We exchanged gifts. We intermarried. When your grandmother was young, their men would raid our cattle and women were captured along with the cattle and goats during raids. Our men would do the same. The aim was to capture their beautiful women and flocks. When the British stepped in there was blood as at Kedong Valley, long ago. There were all those stories about lions. You have to be brave to fight a people who can live near lions! Love lions! Not true that all are fearless. We did not live close to lions. Our people were paralyzed by the story of the legendary lone leopard we often heard about- lion’s ‘cousin’ we called it- the one that prowled the villages at night. We told the story of the animal that goes into homes to eat from a plate. Songs were often composed about how the eyes of this leopard sank into the darkest nights and seemed to fall off the edge of the earth and go down below.”

Kabi asked why the leopard was not eaten by the tall, tall man so slender and who was said to couch his head in the sky being so lanky and taller than any human that ever lived. He was called the ‘Piercer-of -the -sky’ *mũthesha itu* ‘The man who had no wife where everyone had more than one. A new topic came to her mind.

“So not everyone had a wife?” She asked.

“*Mũthesha itu* was an extraordinary being!” Said Wakabi.

“Imaginary. Are there ghosts? If there were animals roaming the earth, how could there be ghosts that were like people? Ghosts that sang weird songs? Ghosts that lived in Menengai Crater and that offered victims maize meal and milk? Ghosts who offered cooked food to their trapped ones before eating *them*? Why did the ghosts

not overpower the animals since both had no homes and lived in forests? Where did they cook their food?"

“Ghosts are invisible they say. Ghosts and humans link up. *Shbrrrbhh!* Even long ago we were scared of some spirits! We laughed at one another’s fright, and then made songs and joked! We talked about our different foods, marveling at the Ūkabi milk and animal blood diet as we ate our green food. Of course they too loved our food. We shared foods. We ate blood cooked in meat. They loved ours and we loved theirs. We did not raid to kill.”

The bird sang clearly again. “*La, lallllaaaaa, laaaa lalaaaa, laaaaalaa!*” Kabi thought it was teasing them now. She knew it was no ghost. It was as if it sang to disagree and to agree.

“I still do not know what they, the Ũkabi, say the little bird sings... I think it is for the two of us to listen. It sings for courage and hope. It is good for us to face and share our fears, to show our tears to another. Mother and child know each other in cries at birth, in wetness. It is good for different peoples, animals, birds and trees to know one another too. It is good when we laugh together and sing and speak about animals, trees and birds. We and the Maasai fought and reconciled, we did not fight and part.”

“The bird sings again, mother. Listen!” The bird sang for long.

When it was silent, Wakabi went on, “Young people whistle to the nightjar and it eagerly responds both night and day. Others made up lyrics about boys for the song of the bird. They say it asks ‘When will the boys, oh, when will the boys, become men?’

“Haaaah?” asked a hostile Kabi.

“Yes, but the bird’s plea reminds me of our longing for freedom in Kenya. Then came self - governance on June 1st, 1963. It was cold. We brought down the Union Jack on a cold December evening too. The moon was bright. Our independence!” Wakabi said.

“Oh, so some say the bird sings about the boys becoming men?”

“Then they say it asks a question. They say the bird asks a question about selfish men. Becoming men, you know, becoming men means to them making women pregnant. Men. Be careful my

daughter, even more when you already have a child and are still in school. They will leave you another one. Some men, always robbing the warmth of women!”

“It is the women, not the boys and men who should ask where they will sleep with their babies, for yes, the children are ours when they come like that. They blame us for all of that. *Kwĩ beboĩĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?* I Kabi ask.” Both of them felt extremely tired. “Let’s hurry, the night gets darker!” Said Wakabi.

Wakabi and Kabi were bent even lower. Walking faster was almost impossible. It hurt. It is impossible to have pain that breaks you spirit and mind and move. It is difficult to have pain that breaks your back into two and move. It is difficult to have pain in the body and continue living with zest.

Ah, difficult to hear the song of a bird that tells a story that one may never fully understand but which one longs to hear and open up to, even sing. Laugh with laughter that opens the song in one. Laughter that lights in you veins that doctors never see when they open you. For it is difficult to have excruciating pain so deep. It is more difficult, if the pain has been inflicted on you and excused by tradition. It takes your insides and eats them up invisibly. Never mind the bad news on radio. There is news written in bodies in blood.

The subtle and swift movements of the clouds reflected on the ground are not unfamiliar in the night skies that cover the hills and valleys of the highlands near Nairobi. Wakabi and Kabi are about to reach home but not before they climb another hill for the last time.

On the peak of the last hill, a man stands free and smokes. Atop the hill he stands like a watchtower. He helps darken the earth with smoke. The light of the evening has changed. It is darker. It is a stark star studded night. The moon still watches. The man too watches but for himself. He sees freely the flood of the city lights below. The city is at his feet.

Kenyatta’s village was not far from here. Wakabi’s aunt lived there. It was not possible to visit her. Who knew the way? A relation

of theirs had disappeared when he walked from there to the city and beyond. People said he might have been eaten by the lone leopard.

Kabi and Wakabi pass the man as they walk. He feels closer to the city of Nairobi than to them. He is distant from bleeding wombs, bleating goats and stinking cows of the village. But in a ritual for men, you will not say he is the same well - dressed man. He will stoop low, even crouch in the bush after independence is achieved. He would do it to 'drink oaths' to protect Kenyatta's rule, this man. It was done in the dark.

Wakabi knew all about it. Some women went too, to 'drink oaths' in the night. They travelled with relatives. She did not go. Wakabi felt a sinister ring enclose the minds of the people with the mystery of oathing done in darkness. Men in the villages lived as if they were in the light of the city but they swore loyalty in the bushes. The moon did not shine brighter over the homes of the rich and the politicians. They were busy with other things. The bird's voice so distant from them, they never heard it.

The sky hugs the ground as if it is the roof of a tent pitched above her and on all sides of the globe. The city runs away turning colder and colder like a distant but shining love chased by an urge to relive. The moon is angered. She changes faces all the time. Sometimes she seems to race like an ostrich in the wild but she runs between clouds gathering her children- short and tall- from all directions and standing still to be washed by wet clouds, floods of tears.

The women trudge on. Kabi stops a while. She moves the strap that keeps her burden on her back from the shallow horizontal groove it has formed in her hair plaited in lines that run from her forehead down. She looks up to the skies longingly. She looks down fast. She gets the strap back on her head. She sees patterns made by clouds playing on the ground in the light of the full moon again. She feels a sense of loss that she cannot share with anybody. She misses the bird. Then the bird sings again.

La, la, la, laaa, laaa! The song of the bird hidden in the ground, continues but it is fading away. The song is out of earshot. But the mark left on Kabi's heart is profound. Suddenly after so long, she knows ever more clearly what the bird told her. All her body is filled with warmth. There it was written in red in her bleeding heart: Hope. That was the long story the bird told her in one word. They were coming to the end of their journey.

Kabi's mother, whom some of the villagers sometimes called Mami wa Wam saw the last light of the skies reflected on the ground in a new way. Out of the darkness, a glowworm went past her eye and soared high.

The moon is changing her clothes behind the clouds. Another glowworm passes by discreetly, above Wakabi's head. It makes its way to a distant land. She wonders if that glowworm knew where the other glowworm had gone. She wondered if the glowworm knew Rome, the Eternal City to which her son had left, many years ago.

The earth path that had snaked its way changed into a wide compound. It was the path that took her home from so many long and hard trips like this one. It led her and her heavy load back home. It brought her children home.

The light of the moon shines silver bright on the ground. The shadows of the clouds, especially the thick ones disappear. All is light again. Life's patterns are not fixed. They change with every step.

In Wa Ngai's house the fireplace was in the center of the kitchen. A little further from it the goat shed was hived off. There were sheep in one section and goats in the other. On a fine day, rays of light fell into the shed. First the animals' horns were warmed up. Later the sun shone on their fat stomachs. Gradually, the animals bathed in the rays of the morning sun that streamed through a long and crooked window. But that was in the mornings. A small can emptied of old tobacco has a little wick in the middle. It has a little paraffin at the base. Light joins light from the flames of fire so that the family can see in the kitchen.

Wa Ngai was then part of a new tradition. People said modern ways had come. A grandmother could live in the house of her married daughter. But where else could she wait for death?

The days had gone when every father had land and granaries were erected outside a ring of huts that made the homestead each hut belonging to a different wife. There was no space here for many wives. There was no space for big herds of cattle and goats in the quarter acre plots. Inside the kitchen house in the corner, directly opposite the goat shed a granary raised on four poles stands. The ground beneath it too had to be put to use.

Bed

Underneath the granary, was Naana's 'bed space.' She was sometimes called Showshow [Cũcũ] meaning grandmother. Her bed was just the opposite of Heidi's as described by Johanna Spyri. Heidi's loft bed was high Showshow's was below. A rough wooden ladder, made of wattle poles, led down directly to her lair. In place of warm, strong sacking on yellow hay, poor Showshow only had old rags for beddings. But she was happy to live with the family of Wakabi. It is taboo but taboo responds to need at times. She was sickly. Alone she would die of isolation.

Three long and high slab stones made the fire place. In an imaginary circle, each stone was placed in a way that divided the circle into three. They were close in the middle ends and apart on the circumference where wood was pushed in. This was the cooking place that was between the goat shed and the granary. Smoke escaped through the opening between the iron sheets and the walls.

Above the cooking place rafters that run across leaning on the granary on one side and the goat shed on the other hold wet firewood. The wood silently dries there with the heat that rises from the fire below.

Green wood was broken by hand and brought home on women's backs. Sometimes it was from old coffee bushes. Scratches from coffee branches became festering wounds.

Hewing and sawing of wood came later. When saws came they were for men. Women hewed with axes but sawing was a man's job. The women still broke wood from branches in the forests with their hands and small cutters. The fire was also lit by the hands of women and fanned by the lungs of women.

Kabi asked many questions about this in class. When she sat down to suckle her son, her questions flowed down with the milk of her breast. The teachers often said that there was great progress in

the homes. At home, Naana told her not to be impatient for only with patience could she be a good mother.

“*Kiññia!*” Naana would say. But in the breath of the sounds of the word that meant ‘Silently bear it all, suffer it’, Kabi hurt. The word also meant to her, not to complain, to be silent. Patience was pressed inside this word.

In this part of the country, almost all traditional round huts had disappeared. A church stood stark on a hill above everything else. Most of the houses in the village were the same. Corrugated iron sheet roofs below were scattered everywhere. Sometimes especially after the rain and sometimes even without it, dewdrops would line up on the edge of the iron sheets like soldiers trying to scale jagged cliffs. The dewdrops hang on and stretched like battalions hiding from death in battle. They fell on mud. Kissing the mud, they disappeared. The ground sucked them before they dried.

The big house of Wa Ngai as it was called stood three meters directly opposite the kitchen. Inside, its narrow crooked corridor carried on to end up with the lopsided wooden back door. The corridor led straight to the sitting room where Atia used to sleep before. Wakabi and Wa Ngai were lucky to have a bedroom. The other room was used by the girls and Jugus.

The front door right opposite the back door was never used. The back door became the main door. The front door stood precariously, threatening to give way if it was opened often. No visitors came in from there. In the light of day the hot sun seemed to be knocking on its fraying wood. During the night rays of the moon seemed to implore it, soothing it as if with a promise. After eating maize and drinking light tea without milk, *turungi*, a name derived from strong tea, meaning tea without milk all went to sleep.

From the days of plentiful milk from many cows, people had learned how to survive on tea without milk. Their lives were the opposite. It was long time ago when they had milk and honey. Long time when they needed no promise of a better land was time gone. In other parts of the country it was the same. There was even more.

Traditional cheese and yoghurt took days to cure, but it was found then. Now the cattle and goats gave no milk except when they gave birth. This meant the milk was for their calves. The first milk after calving -colostrum- was too strong for human stomachs. Some people could take a little of it raw. When a greedy old man who said that he wanted all virgin girls to be his wives drank it, his big stomach came out. He died. That was many years ago. It is almost midnight now. In bed, Baby Jugus sleeps on Kabi's chest suckling now this teat now the other all night long.

Was this the advancement Kabi kept hearing people talk about? Wa Ngai was very proud of his house. He did desire his brother's wooden shelter built on the quarter acre plot right next to theirs, but his brother did not drink new beer. He did not drink traditional alcohol. His brother did not mix all drinks in one, taking regular swigs. Wa Ngai did. A house fully built with wood, without any mud was a sign of wealth trickling into the family. Wa Ngai's house only had wood for doors and the poles to hold it up. It was a house of mud walls.

Wa Ngai knew what he had to achieve, even as he got lost in nights of drunkenness. He consoled himself. Had he not managed to move from a round hut of the Mau Mau village and built for himself a rectangular three - room house of mud in a former Mau Mau reserve? He would even put up another one, one day. A concrete house. Here the girls could be safer. This house he loved was made of rough wattle shafts covered with mud. The wattles could never lie straight as they had twisted joints on their thin bodies. His daughters, their grandmother and mother disliked them. Like unkind knuckles, they poked their weary backs.

Home to breastfeed

Spiderweb number 100 was the name of the minibus Kabi boarded to and from Kaza. Number 100 was the identity for the *matatu* that plied part of her route to and from home. The name, Spiderweb, is what distinguished it from the rest in the fleet marked by that exciting number, 100. An easy-to-write number. *Igana. Magana.* Kenyatta's unsmiling face filled the money bills. A hundred. Hundreds. The first big number that one learns. A number that spells plenty and ambition for all – a hundred per cent! The route Number 100 was not because numbers one to ninety nine were in place. No. It was because a great feeling it was to have a hundred shillings in the pocket of one's imagination. A hundred shillings lining up the pocket of a trouser! Or tucked away safely somewhere on the waist of a skirt; maybe, in a neat knot in one of the corners of a handkerchief; the kerchief was then strung on to the waistband of the skirt.

Inside Spiderweb, Kabi felt uncomfortable sandwiched between two fat men who spoke across her face all the way home. One of them had a terrible breath. Forget about the afternoon lesson she had on fresh rivers and lakes of Afrika! Evening was here. All the Geography she had learnt in her life could well fly out of the window. There was no guarantee here, insurance and such concerns belonged to a different world.

She looked again and recognized one of the men. He greeted her. He was the one with the bad breath. He asked her if she could afford to pay his fare. She could not. He was the brother of her friend Kuku who went to live in the Rift Valley many years past. Kuku died there before coming back home. Many people had gone to live in the Rift Valley to escape poverty. Politicians began to pave unclear ways for them. Kuku had gone with her family to a part of the Rift Valley where they could sell their labor. But a pick-up van heaped with dry maize on cobs had hit her and taken her life as she walked with her

own stack of firewood. Kabi often thought of her whenever she carried heavy piles and walked on the side of the road.

Kabi and Wakabi are fortunate to be alive. Somewhere in the distance, and somewhere near, there are other women who cannot move with pain. So Kabi and her mother are blessed. Yet it is difficult to have pain that breaks your back into two and live. It is trying to have pain in the mind and live. It is arduous to have pain in the body and continue living with zest.

But now Kabi was inside minibus Number 100. The full number and the *matatu* full of people. The old minibus charged down the road at breakneck speed. Kabi knew that her life, her heart as was often said when someone was in great danger, was in her mouth. Passengers had to shout above the noisy clanging of the vehicle. Then they went silent. But not at ease. They felt as if they would be flung out through the windows any time.

The trees of Karura forest stared in shock. At such times, a prisoner in a speeding vehicle, Kabi often wondered how the trees felt with this vehicular intrusion. Sometimes, she thought they were crying, ‘mercy, oh, mercy!’ but there was no ear to hear. Deep inside the forest, tree must have spoken to tree, creeper to creeper about this. Kabi wished she could lead the people to shout out against it.

Maisha ni magumu,’ people often said, life is hard. They said it as if trying to steer their own life ahead. They said it if you tried to lead crowds. Then they promptly reminded you that the crowd was too ‘heavy’, ‘difficult’ even for Musa in the Bible. They said it in many tongues and Kabi heard in her village. *Kĩrĩndĩ kĩa remire Mutha*. After some time, they did not even say the word for crowd *kĩrĩndĩ* Somewhere in the middle of a conversation you would hear... “Weee! *kĩa remire Mutha*. To make money the *matatu* driver put life in danger. Politician and oppressive fathers sell land to make more money. What could one do to stop them? Get out in the forest and be eaten by wild beasts?

Wild animals have never been far away from Nairobi. People talked of how hyenas refused to eat the remains of J. M Kariũki. This

politician kept warning Kenyatta about greed, the grabbing of land like the Brits had done and the hunger that would follow. Kariũki J M was not afraid. His assassination shocked the nation. It happened when Kenya's independence was only 12 years- old. But that was not the first time someone was slayed. When Kenya's independence was six years old Tom Mboya was shot dead in Nairobi on a early Saturday afternoon that was cut by his death. It turned dark of a sudden. Kenya's history was sliced into two threatening obscure forces. Wakabi was sensitive.

She stared at the eye of a big needle. She inserted in it red thread. Wakabi sewed the list of the eliminated people in red on a piece of sack in her house. She could embroider beautiful and strong letters in chain stitch.

Tom Mboya: July 5 1969, six years after independence.

Josiah Mwangi Kariuki: March 2 1975, twelve years after independence.

She tucked the sack in her old box that also had little mirrors. In time, one could hold a black flower bouquet with each stem representing assassinated leaders in Kenya. This wedge tore the nation, bleeding it without hope of healing. Widows. Orphans. They join the orphans and widows of Mau Mau.

Kabi was still in shock in the dangerously moving public vehicle. And that song of hope? That bird that kissed her brow, where was it at this moment when she was being driven so roughly? In this instance when she had no wings and did not know how to drive so that she could demand the key. Where was hope?

Bird must have told bird about the dangers faced by their bird family in the forest and all of them flown further away. Dangers faced by humans too. How humans would ruin nature. Perhaps in this moment birds only had time to think of themselves, Kabi thought. She decided to imagine the silence in the deep of the forest to keep sane. To Kabi, the deep and telling quiet of forests was the expression of nature's fear for its future. The trees were more at risk as Spiderweb 100 zoomed faster past them. It looked like it was the

trees, birds and creepers that were moving fast, not Spiderweb! Was the country a *matatu*?

The journey was ever faster. The over-speeding vehicle zapped down the narrow road as if the driver had never seen the fatal car accidents that were a frequent sight on that same road. These were reported often on radio news. He had seen so many people dead on the roadside but so what? She held her chest in her two hands as her thoughts went into her feelings. She remembered the Nyeri *matatu* with the inscription: 'To Nyeri or to the clouds!' She shuddered.

For Kabi, there was even more discomfort. Her breasts full of milk hurt. She did not share her secret motherhood with anyone at her new school. How deceptive was life? Who would feed her baby and her nation if this car went to heaven instead of to Kĩā? Who would care for her fatherless baby? Some milk leaked through her white blouse but did not show on her grey school jersey.

She only had one bra that she washed and dried at night. Sometimes she put it on a kitchen seat to face the smoke of a smouldering fire. Now she felt it sticking onto her sides under the armpit. The feeling of burning on her breast was followed by a cool sweep of cold moisture. It is as if nature burnt and cooled her tender breasts at the same time.

The seepage of milk was just the one of the many shocks she had after brave unexpected labor. She had never thought breastfeeding was painful. She never imagined that it could feel like losing blood. So many incongruent things in the order of the disorder of nature in her life, came to her mind.

There was distress. She could never understand what rules Biology used to set some women free of their monthly period for nine months after delivery while others got six, four and even less months free of periods. Poor Kabi got none. She bled every month. Here she was bleeding again. She cursed the irregularities of Biology which made her feel like she was a whirlwind, in the same breath as the speeding *matatu* which did make her bleeding worse. And always on her mind the unforgettable violation darkly creeping back.

Every time during the day she imagined that she threw this memory to the sun. She felt well. Every time it revisited her at night she closed her eyes and flung it very high to the moon. She exhaled. But it always came back to her as if it were a banner headline on her mind.

And all that talk about bundles of joy! Kabi thought. The strange freedom on a happy mother's face she did not know now. Hers had been a bundle of faith, hope and suffering. For yes indeed, all she could do was believe in her capable mind – and put it to work and sweat - that she would one day make sense of her life, which people called making 'it' in life.

She had to hope beyond her heart's scope; hope the stars would never lose their light. She had to love beyond the hurting present to nurse a baby, mining the jewels of a strong will and purpose; and that she was doing. She had to plumb suffering to see if inside it love lay. Was suffering one side of a shell the other side being life and the two equal parts holding love in the middle? Was love spread everywhere or in the sky? Was love the precious being lying between two hard shells of faith and hope? Hope was not soft. At least she knew that. It was hidden in faith, maybe, but it was its own thing.

A nightjar sang silently again deep in her mind. It sang. And she recognized in its song again that first kiss on her sweaty forehead. For the first time in a long time, she was deep in thought without Timo, the sired of her son, coming to her mind with violence.

Her father and other Mau Mau fighters often said that violence was unforgettable. They said they would never forget the British rule. The division of the people in the Scramble for Afrika spoke for itself. The bird sang now very near her. She loved it again. But the scar of violence awoke in her again. She felt she could never put it to sleep. Only the priest talked about forgetting as part of forgiveness.

Kabi was unaware of her brilliance that shone like a halo in that moment. That was not what attracted the unknown bird to her. What the bird recognized was her undying faith in her mind and heart. She made her life's purpose with her own hands. For now, meaning

flooded into her from somewhere; and it was focused on her little new creature, her baby. She chose to accept her son as who he was. A little one who came in riding on the storm of hate could be adored, could be loved like and more than a nation.

She understood her own circumstances in a way no-one else could. She understood what it meant to be the opposite of what one wished. She was demanding on herself. Only that way could she live, trying to understand this contradiction. Her resolution made her strong. Her continuing to go to school as a mother gave her a sense of victory.

Kabi, she was the dramatic girl of the family. None would ever know about her many years of secondary virginity. It did not seem to matter what happened to her, in her own step in time, she turned over and flew off again. A certain fire of energy was hidden deep in her and it kept her, managing her affairs minute by minute, day by day. She was never stuck. She appeared and disappeared like the moon. She shaped and re-shaped her world.

Jugus

By this time of the evening, she was certain, Baby Jugus would be very hungry. He would be crying for her breasts. She needed strength to feed him, to feed a whole nation. Her father's sky suddenly darkened again, and she heard his regrets come alive. She had listened to her angry father about having sinned by having a baby while still in school. That happened often when he was asked for money. Sinning by giving birth. It had suddenly started playing like a broken record. It was the national anthem she had often heard. It stuck and pulled on what people thought were important words as if teasing her. How could she serve in more 'earnest endeavor'. She needed a break.

Kabi had brought Wa Ngai's detention fears in Mau Mau days to him all over again. Every man who was detained feared that a child they had not sired would be at home if and when they went back to freedom. They composed songs to greet wives and all the children they left. They knew that their wives got raped. That they endured incest.

They knew that they would have to be silent fathers of children they dared not ask about. For some men, it was the end of life to hear that their wives conceived while they were in detention. Nothing could appease them. Their tradition could not.

Tradition kept incest checked. Certain relations could not even share a house, could not at a time of need allow use of the same sleeping space with them. Close vicinity was forbidden and when taboo was broken, seen as incest. In-law ground was regarded as hallowed. Wa Ngai knew all this. He knew that babies deserved comfortable births. He wanted all nativities to be cheerful and filled with celebration. He tried to but feared he could not fit Jugus in his heart. Jugus, a child of 'war' not of love. Wa Ngai felt distant and cold.

He was haunted by thoughts from the past. A new born baby in the school's bathroom, a public place near human waste, is where his grandson was born. He said he was glad he had never been near that boarding school. Going to her school would be too much for him. How would he carry so much shame on his forehead, he asked himself. He never stopped to think how she managed it. His honor was his. Not that he spoke to her of day schools. He complained. He was not a willing grandfather. It was too early for that.

For so long Kabi had suffered. She was simple. Childlike. She felt this was enough. She remembered how she had to fake politeness to Mother Superior who visited and lectured her at home. At home. It reminded her of the shocked school Matron's litany of her failures, faults and most grievous sin. She only talked about them after Kabi gave birth. Before that she could not pick Kabi out of ten girls in school. She did not know Kabi. Why was not her heart touched by her courage? Had she no compassion? But Kabi's heart of hearts was not crushed. She felt no sin. Sweet life was never going to be alien to Kabi. She would carry on. That night after Sista Mirella left Kabi shared with her sisters what only Wakabi had known.

Kabi decided to avoid going near the convent school where her friends asked to study sometimes during the holidays. For all Jugus' tears and the fears she had there was her life to live. Her Christmas would not forever be the story of the birth of a baby, long time ago in Bethlehem, born of a young virgin girl. It was her life. Her own breath not so long ago, when she held her son alone, a baby whose life she could feel pushing out of her hands. A child rejected by his father. She held Jugus in her arms and soothed him. There was in her hand a dying nation.

No one could define the moment when a woman realizes that the child in the arms belongs only to her and her breast. That she is alone in the world. It is a moment of great pride on the one hand and yet full of challenge. In that moment a wounded woman can fly like a god with a country knit close to her breasts like a baby, even without a shawl or *a kanga*. A new Madonna. Kabi arose.

Kabi's heart ached, but there was no more time for thinking in fear. Spiderweb was in the town. Her journey not yet over. She had to buy vegetables at the wayside market quickly. Then she got into a crowded old Ford saloon car. She held her breath. The car was so rickety that its makers would have thought it was a new invention. It spewed smoke and heaved and climbed the hill at a crawling pace. Then it was put on free gear and it hurtled downhill. Here the manufacturers of the car would have a fine object of research if they would leave their fast world to study the making of jalopies in the so-called slower countries. She paid her five shillings.

She alighted and took a path on the left of the famous Uberi Golf Course. This was the only place some families brought out their few goats and sheep to graze as the men played golf barefoot. It was the place where the words 'manicured golf course' had never been heard of but still real golf was played there near the Chief's Office. Chiefs were unpopular but powerful. She took the path on her left. It led home. From the main road she walked home briskly in strong and sure steps.

It was getting dark. She could see the beautiful green flowering potato plants which dusk was gradually turning into a dark carpet. She could see a couple of banana trees on the bigger parcels of land. Such pieces of land were found on the periphery of village. She had to walk far to get deep into the village.

Kabi walked along a road that went around one of those bigger farms before reaching the village. A sudden wind swept through the leaves of a banana bush. She ran. She remembered the day Timo had ripped off her clothes. How he covered her mouth. How she bled. How she kept dreaming she had fallen into an open well and that the water swelled and covered her to the top of her head.

If the five banana trees growing in a small ring had held hands, they would have been ready to dance a dirge in a circle with her, but they could not. Their old brown leaves had fallen almost to the ground and swung there painfully. Pushed by gentle and rough winds they drew maps of her nation.

The younger leaves still pointing to the horizon made a startling sound as their leaves split into small ‘rastas’ that shook again in the wind as they had done that night when he held her tightly to indulge his own body, abusing her, raping her and thrusting books at her after. A gift. A donation of education! An alphabet. A civilization! Like the many gifts the colonial legacy is said to be for her land and others. Roads. Cars. Bras. Education. Stockings. Jobs. Stiff skirts. Artificial hair. Straightened hair. Jersey cows for zero grazing. Pipes and pumps for water as rivers dry and frogs and their eggs disappear because sophistication comes.

Kabi would not see that in the center of the banana plants, a spider was busy spinning its web. The thread of the spider web was moist with soft dew. It shone in the evening light. The spider would never stop until its home was safe. Its castle was ready. Not aware of just how delicate its web was in the midst of the harsh wind, the spider only knew its world. Kabi’s mind was set.

In four minutes she had lapped over three dark valleys and two hills. She was at the kitchen door. Kabi did not run to the toilet in the corner of the quarter acre land. She tied a colorful *kanga* which was in her bag around her uniform. She had never read the words on it, but the night bird may have- *masikini bachoki*- a person who is poor, rests not. But she knew poverty was not mere lack.

“Mother, give me my baby,” She said in a half requesting and half commanding tone. She had not put down her books. They fell to her feet around her as if they were roots to a tree whose branches were her arms and her son’s. A tree whose torso was her body.

“Here is *my* son, take him and feed him! Sonny, sonny, here is your mother!” She said, quickly handing over the crying baby. Wakabi knew what was happening and did not need to ask any questions. She knew Kabi’s breasts were sore and gorged with milk. It had seeped out and travelled like little rivers around her blouse. It was as if the threads in her blouse were capillaries. Wakabi could see it seep out live. It was cream white. She knew that her grandchild would go for the breast and fuss and then feed all night long! She knew babies did

not suckle only for nourishment but to root themselves to mother earth.

She knew that most baby boys had a style of suckling quite distinct from most baby girls. Wakabi knew that each baby had its unique way of feeding. Kabi could not even dream of taking a bath. Later she would do a dusting and use the little water from a tin bath to clean parts of herself. Somehow she would manage; she would wash the dust off her legs well.

“Yee, yee, yeeeeeeeh,” the baby went on. “Huummm, hmm, hmm Jugus, Mhhh Jugus, “ Kabi responded trying to soothe the terribly irritated boy. She delayed his urge to swallow her nipple, trying to take it out his mouth a little for the pain. It hurt him and it hurt her. Then the baby took it between his lips with eyes closed, suckling hard and then hardening his lips and throwing the nipple out to show his displeasure! He claims independence. Kabi felt even more pain. Her sisters Wam, and Aris watched Kabi knowingly. Aris had almost become a cousin for her long absence. Jugus spewed his mother’s breast out of his mouth again.

“This is a very difficult child!” Aris burst out. She had come over to help.

“Quite!” agreed Wam. Aris and Wam dreamed of an easier life. Lives in which ‘A’ led to ‘B’, then ‘C’ and eventually, ‘Z’. It was hard for the two of them to understand Kabi. Wakabi never asked any questions about Kabi. She filled the missing gaps. She was the background of all these changes like a sturdy baobab tree giving peace free. Spitting blessings into her chest.

“No, he is a great boy! Maybe Jugus just can’t stand the smoky air that fills the kitchen when the firewood fails to light up,” Said Kabi.

Kabi spoke to the baby and rocked him trying to be as motherly as she could possibly be. She stroked the young one but he only cried more. “Sssshhhh, Jugus my baby,” she hummed. There was a song playing on radio. It was a Mau Mau song of the ‘fight’. Wa Ngai altered the volume to its highest level. Jugus screamed and Wa Ngai lowered the volume again.

Jugus the king went on crying. The baby went round some three different pairs of arms. It was almost a pass-it -on game. Jugus stopped crying at Kabi's breast when he finally got into his mother's hands again. His face was pressed between her breasts. He turned his face first to the left and suddenly to the right as if he smelt milk in both directions and was confused on where to start 'milking' his mother. He finally got her left nipple into his mouth. He fell asleep. She smiled.

She pressed her palm gently on Jugus' back. He slept soundly. She put him to bed. He lay sweetly in his wooden cot. It was a bed a slightly drunk Wa Ngai had unexpectedly decided to make that afternoon using old pieces of wood.

After months, Wakabi recovered her gait and happy heart as her grandson grabbing Kabi's breast seemed such a marvel. She sang. Her daughter could have died but lived. She sang. She danced in her mind. No one could hear her say, "*iiiini, noũguo, ini ũguo! Nĩwakĩona... rora!*" She was showing a dance move to her imaginary audience... and saying, "Yes. Like that. Yes, it is like that. Have you seen... Look!"

At last Kabi too started to smile for long again. She was soon singing joyfully: *Lalalabaaa! Lalalllalaab! Lalalllaaab!* She was more sonorous than her bird. Even when they ridiculed her, many wished she was not so extraordinary. They envied her. They had seen it when she arrived in the village carrying her baby in the crook of her left arm as if she had always had one. Wakabi had become her shield, her shade and shelter. Her justice and defender.

Baby Jugus inside the new cot and outside the sagging old bed was indeed like a little king, *mfalme*. Soft blue bootees, nice little shirt made of a woolly fabric. Kabi had bought these at the Indian Bazaar in Kĩa Town. The tiny designs of children, rabbits, squirrels, toy cars and dolls looked lovely on the linen that wrapped him. The baby's white shawl was rich and warm.

When Kabi had insisted that Wakabi tell her what the bird says, it was because she heard the sound of the cry of her child, her land in

the bird that sang. From that time whenever the bird sang, Kabi knew she heard the broken cry of her son in song of the bird.

The little king's suitcase had even more knitted wonders of many colors. They were sent by Kabi's friends in the village. Some came from school friends from other regions of Kenya. They had found a way of getting little parcels to Kabi. They were filled with things and with love, these parcels. 'King' Jugus! He, like all babies, smiled at being in a world that humans did not see. He made sounds full of life and hope. He seemed to know the secret of the nightjar's song. The bird that sang: 'Oh it's so cold, Oh, it's so cold, where shall I sleep?' "*Kwĩ heboĩ! kwĩ hebo ngũkomakũ?!*"

When Kabi was pregnant, she saved every shilling from her school pocket money. She saved every shilling from school holiday coffee picking earnings except when she brought her Mum a green and gold headscarf. It was shaped in a triangle form with a base which would come to her forehead when she wore it. There it was spongy and soft. Three equal broad stitched lines divided it evenly.

The rest was the money with which she made her baby a 'King'. For many hours, Jugus slept in his cot. Later she moved him close to her chest again. She kept her breast ready for him. If he should wake up, it would be immediately stuck into his mouth so that he could suckle, dream and smile in his sleep. And with him smiled a whole country but nobody saw that.

Sometimes Baby Jugus even chuckled in his dreams. Kabi gave him tender love. The next day she would be leaving early for school. Breast and warmth, helping hands, sleeping late and studying early in the mornings, a little insecticide for the fleas and jiggers, many little motherly cuddles and sacrifice were all her memories. They held Kabi's fast world in place as she gave her nation the life in her breast.

Cracks of loneliness

The goat shed in the kitchen was valued. The joint of wood that held their leaves up so that they could chew from below was always checked to make sure it was firm and strong so that the animal feed would not drop and touch dung. The sheep and goats did not eat food soaked in their urine that turned their droppings into flowing waste matter. But it was in a goat shed in another house where a man who was now an ancestor, committed suicide. His honor was to die among his goats. He said he would breathe them as his last ‘meal’, and that their bleating would be the final cry of his horn.

In this new way of living in quarter acre plots in the village, it was unlawful to grow more than one banana tree and to plant napier grass. Some maize and beans sparsely planted sufficed for human food. The Chief walked around and checked. *He* obeyed the British law under Kenyatta. The District Commissioner kept an eye on the people. *He* obeyed the British law under Kenyatta. The Provincial Commissioner surveyed the land under British law. *He* obeyed British law under Kenyatta. People had no choice. The people traveled the way Kabi and her mother did from many little homes every day and all the time to and from their little lands which they called Reserves. In the legal books it was written Native Reserves. Some walked to their bigger parcels of land in the mornings and came back in the evenings. Others went in the evenings and returned in the nights. Almost all of them worked the land all day long on Saturdays. Often women did this alone.

Banana leaves were strong meal for goats. If only animal feed grew nearby women would be relieved from searching for goat feed so far away from home. They would spare their backs. Women had to carry the leaves chopped with *pangas* home from distant larger pieces of land called *shambas*. This meant farm and yet their land was not farmland. What people called farms, were pieces too cut up to be

real farms because development had come. It was risky to set animals loose on the small piece of land. They would feed indiscriminately. They would eat up all vegetables in the kitchen gardens. They would devour too the neighbor's maize as they quickly moved from area to area. The land was too small. It was just slivers of the less fertile land. Sometimes, babies were kept between banana trees or even planted in the soil as women worked. At the end, the babies would go home sitting on a burden on women's backs.

Beautiful big farms belonged to rich colonial farmers inland where sunburnt hands rode horses. Progress was being brought to the people in the shape of city hotels. In the countryside, the people were ordered to grow wattle trees and tan leather. The eucalyptus arrived. Coastal land was best for holidays and tanning human skin. Farmers here were poor. Progress. When it came to the countryside, progress was called Zero grazing. Zero grazing was what the people were made to celebrate. Zero grazing at the expense of women's backs and bodies, was the alternative. It was said that traditional animals invited wars. But progress had come and some people could even drive. Others were trained teachers and nurses. Did that not bring development home? It was easy to overlook what this progress was destroying.

Some men did not mind looking for animal feed, but they were few. Donkey carts were expensive and only a few could own one. Settlers who were never called refugees or *wakimbizi*, owned acres and acres of land. Many had embraced a new religion. To go to school and to church, one had to be in clean clothes. People admired new suits, cars and food and they wished to be like the settlers in all ways. Politicians dressed like settlers. They had to enjoy life. *Suti* for suits for men and *tai* for tie and *taito dii* for title deed, were heard in every conversation: *Suti*, *tai* and *taito dii*.

Local language was rich in words that describe all forms of human suffering here. Some of the words sounded like being crushed: *kunyanyaswa*. Like worms rolling on hot earth: *kũbinyĩrĩrĩkio*.

People spoke about problems that ate them. They lived entire lives seeking refuge at home.

Here, no cows came home from grazing far away in this part of the country. It was over populated land. There were two herds left. The one of the deaf man and the other of a very old man who lived long into the 20th century. Then he too died.

There was a time when the suicide's father owned vast acres of land where animals grazed in the sun. They chewed cud in the afternoon. They came home in the evening. He sat at the entrance to welcome them if he had not gone out to shepherd them. He called them out by name. One by one they trooped in. He talked to his wife about the one black one that was soon to calf. Then the animals slept as flies danced lazily around their eyes. Then under the light of the moon they chewed their cud until they slept and dreamt through the night as some settlers wrote books. They had come and life had changed. There were many stories to write and tell about wild life in their Africa.

When he was alive, the man who killed himself found that he had no space to graze animals outside. Still, owning some goats was important. He had no wife, this man. His herd, he always joked, would one day bring him home a pretty woman. In the end he saw the dark picture. Life would not give him a bride. Livestock was not a sign of wealth anymore. Loneliness had entered traditional ways through and through. There were now people who were unknown in villages. The dead man had been in his isolation one with his animals. Showshow was often deeply lonely during the day too. The times had changed in a way she could not grasp.

The women carried the colonial burden like nobody else. *They* knew colonial times had not ended. Colonialism always looked into their past, present and a future that became one in deprivation. In those past days people recalled, the times of the father of the man who killed himself, joy whistled in the trees and bushes, the goats, sheep and cows moved in herds wearing cow bells, over hills and valleys all day long. The men and boys herded them. Women were

stronger than formal education could ever make them. They sang and told their stories to leaves and trees. Warmth was in food and greetings. Lengthy conversations probed one on how the whole family was faring. Sad stories were heard on radio. There were many black people who were sold faraway to work on plantations and after many years they were still poor in America and other lands.

In those days in the cold season, a shepherd would carry a tin full of hot coals and swing it near him to dispel the cold and the clinging mist to keep him warm.

From the misty distance, you only knew there was someone there because of the shining coal that followed the circular movement of his hand as he swung the burning coals round and round. These stayed in place and could not fall because of the speed. And in the coals when he stopped, he would peel off the leopard dotted skin of a white roasted sweet potato. Eager fingers would be grateful to hold the heat in the potato close to him. This was not much unlike the men Atia saw where he lived. They stood their hands thrust deep into a pocket full of warm chestnuts. They shared them with passing friends.

Now grazing herds were pictures in the mind. The three to four or six goats were the new 'herd' in the homes. This herd was a 'relic' of the past happy flocks. Each family, always well identified by *mbari* or clan, kept some 'things of warm blood' as they called livestock. A 'relic' at Wakabi's home was some goats and sheep that depended on women for preservation; living beside the kitchen, inside the house in the small quarter acre plots for black people surveyed by white colonial order.

The clans and *mbari* were dying too. The respect based on knowing who was who in the village was fast disappearing. Every old person children met made them recite their lineage like prayers in a rosary. They always asked them, 'Child, do you remember my name?' They were then asked where their ancestors came from, it was a test the young felt ashamed to fail. They tried their best. Timo was rude when an old man asked him if he recognized him. He taught modern

things he said. He did not want to repeat such foolish village history. History in books was about Europe and America.

whose baby is this?

Wakabi's family was revered because of the word education. Education was sold and was said to be the source of advancement. Wam, Wakabi, Aris and Atia were honored in the village. As for Kabi there was hesitation. What could a mother learn in class they asked? Who should go to school they asked, her boy or herself? She should only till the land they answered and save money to take her son to school. Atia's name was constantly on his father's, lips. Wa Ngai was a proud man. When he was not too drunk to speak Wa Ngai boasted too about his daughters.

Now he had changed. When he was drunk he sang about the pains of his daughter. When he was sober, he tried to understand Kabi but felt as if he was dealing with something slippery. He swung to extremes. He resorted to praises when he was drunk. Sometimes he would stop suddenly in the middle of his applauses. It was as if a flood of fear got into his throat. He would warm his throat with more drink. He was in denial. He began to bitterly complain. He contradicted himself.

He sang that his son stolen from him by the some sisters without mercy, would never be seen again. Instead, he said, they brought him home images and sculptures of little boys for Christmas. Wakabi tried to stop him but he would not stop it. He said that his daughter was made pregnant by 'the nobody' in the wind that blew around the local church.

Tonight Wa Ngai is drunk. He sings his way home from the shopping center. He takes his path home like a Z placed across the road, moving from one side to the other. He is not able to walk straight. When he tries to stand up, his head thrusts itself forward. He runs after it as if he expects it to fall to the ground. After sometime he is in better control. He sings broken verses in Gĩkũyũ, Kiswahili and English. He sings in KiLatini too.

Unlike his wife, a teacher who proudly tilled land, he does not know Kiswahili and English well. He staggers and the words spew out of his mouth. He slurs over the words. *“W’hoosh shaiild is this who lries on my dotta’s lap and eat my home? Yes, it is me Wa Ngai, Aaah, Wa Ngai... of God aki sssing. I akkkkse again!”* He almost falls and then seems to manage. It is still hard. His head is ready to go before his feet. He is now slightly bent. He pushes himself forward. His feet seem to get glued to one spot. He reels. He goes in circles. He starts to walk again.

He almost kisses the thorns of the kei apple fences that rise on either side of village paths to protect homes and land. He falls hard in the middle of the path. He stops singing. He grunts. He lies there, a heap. He is lucky that only the parish car was often on the village paths. There is no car now it is night.

The night eyes of the village that see him do not see Wa Ngai the drunkard. They see his soul. They see the man who wants to banish his own thoughts. The one who works with his body and mind. They see his bleeding efforts. They always understand men. They say that he and others have bad, bad dreams from detention camps. They say they need help. Women do not drink and sleep on the roadsides as men do. They bear the sorrow of loneliness in colonial times. They are in deep prayer all the time, more than all their ancestors ever prayed to One God. They do not swear. They peg their words on One God. *Ngai ūmve*. In the past, men were away held in confinement by the British. Now men seek leisure. Men sit on high on bar stools. Some are away for long at work and study. Women bear loneliness in the altars of their dreams. Soon they make new sacred corners inside houses. Their own altar.

Wa Ngai sleeps on a village path. Wakabi prays he is well. Some pain forces him to wake up. Red safari ants have found their way into his pants. He writhes and tears flow without a word. Only grunts. A young boy rescues him. He is passing by. The little one opens Wa Ngai’s trousers to relieve him of his pants and the ants. Wa Ngai urinates on himself and on the boy.

When Wakabi heard about this, she was deeply embarrassed. Wakabi warned Wa Ngai that not once did safari kill by going right into air passages until the drunkards could not breathe at all. It was a long time before she could laugh again.

No one asked the meaning of the songs Wa Ngai sang in church language. He twisted Latin Mass songs in high spirits. He complained that he could not dance to the songs. There he went on with the tune of the *Adorate devote*. He sang it in his own language. But his words were not about eating holy bread.

“Once I declared I was hungry, and I was answered by the Christians who heard me, that it was then better to commit suicide. *Ndoiga ndimobotu, gervo deite.*” The words in Latin rhymed with the [ts] in his own tongue... *mobotu, weite. devote*. They were rhythm and rhyme perfect. Wakabi disliked this. She wanted holy songs undiluted and secular songs pure. Now that he was sober, she told him to sing holy songs in church and to forget his madness.

She told him that she was happy she had won the battle against his brother who wanted all his daughters to be circumcised. She wanted him to be unshakeable in this resolve and so she went on to strike his deepest cord. “How can they circumcise your mother Kabi? She has already given birth to you. Some things must stop somewhere.” Many people had kept on saying that Kabi was not an adult because she had not ‘been to the river’. This meant she was not circumcised.

Church and Wakabi stood firmly against the circumcision of all her girls. She tried to dissuade others. Timo and many teachers were against her. As for Wa Ngai, he pronounced that his wife and girls were free to do what they wished to and not to do what they did not want. His judgment surprised many. It was the opposite of what those men who were faithful to traditional drink chose. His brother was against him. Wa Ngai did not respect his brother’s idea. His brother could keep his wooden house and stop cutting girls Wa Ngai said. Many men who did not drink alcohol at all disagreed with him. Wa Ngai had nothing to lose.

Wa Ngai. Kabi had tried his power. Her strength shook him. Kabi, the girl who was delivered of a baby before she sat her last Biology exam threatened something in him. Somehow her experience intimidated him. His pride of the time was crushed but he had been humble in learning something new. He had to learn that there were other things to be proud of. That circumcision of girls did not make them better able to bear children as many had believed before. It was the opposite. Circumcision was not going to give them anything but to take away their joy in the future and power. He said he was ready to fail if cutting clitorises was success.

Wa Ngai always told his friends that his girls were not the type to go lying down in bushes with men, and indeed they were not. Nobody spoke about men's positions. Women walked defined by fear in every way. This fear touched where and how to be. The insistence on girls to sit properly, even when they sat well gave them a message.

"Sit properly!" A Grandmother would be heard say. "*Ndūgatūrame!*" That was a word Kabi could not translate even as she learned perfect English. It meant sitting with one's feet sprawling astride and showing deep into one's legs. One's legs were supposed to be squeezed in with bottoms tucked in except when one had to open legs for mutilation and soon after to 'help' men. Then at such times the whole village danced and sang. There was no limit to vulgarity. People who sang in church led circumcision songs cheerfully.

Girls believed that if they sat well and were circumcised they were great and had power over those who were afraid to 'go to the river' for circumcision. They were made proud of mutilation and of serving men. They were told that was just cooking for men. That before that if they sat well, did not open their mouths wide, go to films and only walked in daylight, they were very good. Kabi had obeyed all these things.

Now she knew that was false faith. Silence had filled society's ear with wax. Fear sealed their lips. The silence outside met the muteness inside them. Kabi heard the song of the bird breaking this stillness.

Babies were celebrated. Kabi's was not. As if Jugus knew, he cried very often. Sometimes he stopped suddenly as if something was stuck in his voice. The villagers did not stop talking.

Wakabi could not bear the village whisperers. The teachers too spoke behind her back. In her heart a big question rang. 'If it were your daughter would this also be just be a story?' Pregnancy was not an original tale but all tongues loved to yap about it. Ahh, the daughter of so and so! *Mwari wa W'a Nga!* Wakabi knew this was always turned into a main thing in each girl's life. The villagers waited for girls to 'fall' as if they walked on a high and tight rope. About Kabi, words went round and round and they flew high to the bird. It was strange how from lip to lip, everyone in the village said that Kabi had got a stomach. It was as if everybody else did not have one. They planted failure around Kabi like banana trees that enclosed her and would not let her out. Who could give her retribution for her lost hymen?

She hoped that word on her pregnancy would not go down hills, cross valleys and climb to the ears of the head teacher for then she would not get the certificate of Advanced Studies. Mwarie died alone aborting. Mwarie was a Catholic girl: dejected, rejected and ejected. Pain, fear, cold death, a *dokita* hidden in dark shadows. Dirty money. Fear. Kabi meant to be certified and then denounce Timo to the District Education Officer. For Timo had his way. Wakabi told her that he helped some students pass by giving money to examination markers. They were silent about his demands for sex for grades.

Pregnant Kabi decided to struggle to hide herself in herself. It had been done before by many girls, they had kept the secret. They were uncomfortable in there by themselves, but they hid. Some were found out. Others were not. Some classmates knew but kept it to themselves. They tried to encourage their fellow student in trouble. Teachers were not to know. It was not hard to keep them out. Often

the teachers in the schools seemed blind. Kabi was relieved that there were no pregnancy tests done that year. She escaped notice for she was not too big.

To be ostracized when one needed loving care was too much to bear, it was better for one to sever oneself. Kabi was an active girl. She did not suddenly slip into a baggy cardigan. That would be a sure sign that something was wrong. During the holidays she could loosen up her clothes and relax.

In the village even when she was away, the talk went on. The talk became the village drama. Gestures, words and even songs about fallen mighty ones were part of it. Timo led the fallen angels' team that stoked the village talk like a fire. Kabi was strong. Everyone was asking everybody no other question. Was Kabi really pregnant? Kabi the leading girl in the province? Then she was back in school, still pregnant and disguising all very well. She was out of their sight.

No one asked her how she managed with morning sickness or if she had any. Not even later, after she was delivered of her baby did the prattle stop. It got worse. Everyone asked everybody else about her in the village. They wanted to know who made her pregnant. Timo began to drop names: The mad man called Woki. The priest. Teachers at her school. Her father. A witch. The witchdoctor was only visited in total secrecy. But did she go to see him? Did he make her pregnant? The nuns did not get to hear any of this. They sang in preparation for a baby at Christmas time. They were not expecting Baby Jugus.

No one knew of her agony that night in the bush when she conceived amidst terror, pain, and tears. Only Wakabi did. She held up her daughter's honor. She would not talk much about it with Wa Ngai who drunk even more. He would perhaps shout about it when he was drunk. The women were locked in silence.

Kabi could not go to the hospital near school for pre-natal care since no one could leave the gates without a note and in school uniform. Records are dangerous. What then was the use of education she wondered? What is written is written, all, like Pilate knew. Her

mother, a teacher risked her daughter's life for education. Life weighed the same as education. Endless nights of fear.

She was a strong girl. A month after bearing her child, Kabi was a student at Kaza Private School. That is where she had to repeat a year to sit her final exam again. That is where she was coming from when she and Wakabi went to work the land.

Kabi's mornings were hard, her evenings tough. Her questions were ceaseless.

She remembered the first time that she felt her taut little stomach with her fingers at the beginning. Then her fears were confirmed. She remembered the first shock like an electric force that moved on her fingers as they felt her belly and suddenly run into her heart almost bursting it. A catastrophe. She was silent for many weeks. Her mother lost weight. There was no need of telling Kabi's teachers. No headmistress would help her. No nun.

Kabi grit her teeth as if dealing with this was simply work that had to be done. It was work like washing clothes. Work like toiling hard to fill a container with coffee berries that she picked on a terrible and rainy day. She became the definition of an adult according to her. An adult did not complain about any difficulties. She was active and did not sleep in class. That was usually the first sign of alarm to teachers. She almost made it. Kabi fought in the middle of tradition and new ways. She could never impress tradition enough.

A girl like you

The sound of an attempt to gather and spit out mucous came from her Showshow. She rattled her throat with disdain. It was something people did when they saw someone they did not like. They would then spit out just in front of them. But Kabi knew Naana had a bad chest. Naana was not angry with Kabi but she was not happy for her. Her own daughter had done better in the eyes of the people. Kabi looked at her kindly. Naana's frail figure was like a framed picture as she sat in the kitchen doorway in the mornings. She sat leaning forward on a roughly hewn wooden plank grounded firmly by two other pieces of wood, her chair.

Sometimes, when this chair was propped against the kitchen wall, she leaned back and slept. The wall became the back part of the chair. The chair looked like a small bridge on the ground outside where she now sat. The light of the sun became stronger. She said that the rays bit her skin. She said that she saw black spots far in the shining sun. Then she said she became blind for some moments.

She moved into the kitchen. Kabi lifted her chair for her. Naana sat still on her seat propped on the mud wall. The uneven surface pushed her shoulder blades in crookedly back into her flesh. She certainly knew the difference between old times and the present. These modern walls were not like the polished ones of the huts that were built in her days and smoothened with cow dung. She was proud of how they did things long time ago. She saw no progress here. She blew her nose noisily and quickly cleaned her fingers against the sooty dry wall.

Kabi was staying home this day. She had herself to thank for not feeling sick looking at that thick liquid sliding down the wall. The mucous was tinged with snuff. She could thank too, the dry and crispy air in the house. Somehow she could forget the sound of mucous traveling down the throat of her grandmother and not even worry about bacteria. If it had been a cold and wet day, without a fire

burning, Kabi knew she would have felt sick listening to the sound of mucous being gathered in the throat again and again. Naana aimed fairly well and spat into the ashes in the fireplace this time!

Kabi looked tenderly at Naana. She always inserted tobacco in her nostrils to sneeze. Naana promptly pulled a dirty but colorful *shuka* around her flabby flesh on her legs.

Kabi looked at her granny lovingly again. She forgot her own hard nights as she thought of her grandmother's poor bed. She longed for the day she would be able to give her some basic joys. She hoped Naana would live to enjoy the comforts of a good bed, the type one longs to lie on.

Naana spat again. Kabi spoke.

“*Cũcũ mĩ*, we are thinking of getting the old bed fixed for you.”

“You are very kind child, but old flesh like mine needs to lie on a tough surface. You will soon need to fix me in rough wood and put me in the ground!” Naana had answered to the surprise of Wam who had walked in quietly. The old woman continued to speak like a doctor explaining that it was much better to sleep on a hard surface than on such a sagging thing. And that she was old enough *to go*. Naana stared at Kabi. It was as if Naana had a quarrel with the air.

“And remember child, you will need your bed and everything you have. You have given birth. A girl like you will not be married by anyone... for a girl like you, no dowry, they will call you *gĩcokio*... a left over human being, the rejected one or the one who is returned. You have a child and no one is going to bring things, property to your father because of you. It is hard for you. I do not know if your education will marry you, a girl like you. You must be prepared for that!”

Kabi did not say a word. That is not what one did with elders. One listened. Their words were like hidden gospels in their old chests. Revelations. But Kabi's worth had been stamped on her spirit by that bird. Nothing scared her. She felt assaulted but what language could speak to tradition about change except just laws? Who was telling Timo such things? ... *Gĩcokio* indeed, she retorted in her heart.

She did belong to this house, did she not? She knew that there was another 'House' of strong family and clan bonds. Was it not all hers too?

Nyũmba - 'House'. House here meant those who belonged and did things together within accepted norms and conventions. It did not only mean the constructed place of abode but also bonds. Naana was simply pointing Kabi to the room of women in this 'House' context. A 'room' of sorrow. Naana used to say that it was not possible for women to escape completely the clutch of something. Her own daughter was educated she said, only to be married to a heavy drinker. Kabi was in that 'room' now, the 'room' of traditional mores. For all that thatching and warming of traditional houses women were not considered as belonging to the invisible 'House' made of bonds of clans. It did not matter that they mothered the nation.

Well, Kabi and all the others lived in this home even if men often repeated that women never fully belonged to an age group or completely to the 'House'. Firm family ties were only unquestionable for men. Owners. Something always seemed easily severable from women all their lives. That included their hymens, ears, labia and skins. Their identity. Their sense of belonging.

These girls were born in this house but it was not theirs. It was not the property of Wakabi but it was for her to look after. It is the house that was opened to the villagers as they trooped in for prayers when Naana died in her underground bed in the kitchen. This was the house in which Atia, Kabi, Aris and Wam were conceived in on that spring bed on a weary mattress. The spring bed was valuable. A Singer Sewing machine was hidden under the bed in there. It was later sold for school fees.

Wakabi sewed and embroidered beautifully still. She made smocked frocks on material with green and white squares for her girls when they were small. Some goats too were sold later for school fees. That was when some people said Wa Ngai was as mad as Woki. They said that one did not sell property to invest in girls. That it was the

girls who should have been sold to build both the houses and the House. The House was not for the protection of girls. Tradition and contradiction. It had its men. Wa Ngai drank unlike traditional men who mainly drunk to measure using cow horns. He also made his decisions far apart from them even when he sat with them in groups talking and drinking. He was building a House for his own family.

His house was in bad shape. Just like tradition it in time got angry cracks in the walls. Some of the cracks were stuffed with newspapers and rags. The closer such cracks were to the 'beds' the more they were sealed off. Freezing air of the highlands coupled with bug bites were not anyone's dream of a peaceful night; but still there was calm. Tradition was filled with rites and words.

Kabi and Wam shared a 'bed'. It was strung together by thin ropes woven and tied around the bed frame. It sagged. It looked like a hammock pitched in the wrong place. There was no romance here. There was no island air here and no one was serving juices in long glasses. Lots of rags stuffed into a bag, made a mattress. It was impossible to keep to one side of the 'bed' when they slept.

The girls had to fill bags with rags to make a secure place for the baby in those days. Jugus Wam and Kabi were lumped in the middle all their nights. Elsewhere on the side, in two little wooden boxes, they had no clothes to keep. Each one kept what they wore under the 'mattresses'. The clothes raised up their heads like a pillow would. Books sat in a carton box on the side.

In the wooden boxes, each girl kept small broken mirrors that you would find dangerous and throw away. These were pieces of glass as they could cut busy fingers searching for something in the dark, or even in the light. But these mirrors never cut these girls' fingers.

For the girls, pieces of mirrors had to be there, always somewhere else to look into, perhaps hide oneself. That was a girl's room. It was possible not to see the rough walls of the house but one's shining eyes. After all they were often told they had transitory homes. Were they not to try and capture determination and beauty, gleaming

beauty forever in mirrors? They were like mornings. Mornings and mirrors created and carried possibility. The little mirrors carried no darkness or time with them. Mornings broke and poured out of horizons like egg yolks out of shells, holding the strength and vitamins of the sun.

When he was drunk Wa Ngai kept asking what he was supposed to do or say to a girl, a mother – mother. Kabi had named her child Jugus Wa Ngai. She was named after her paternal grandmother so Wa Ngai called Kabi ‘mother’. When sober, he promised her bus fare for daily travel. He told her never to take a lift even from the priest. He was sober when he asked her to take a sweet potato to eat in the city at break time.

Kabi had been first in the whole province in her Ordinary level exams and Wa Ngai knew she was not one to fail her Advanced Level exams. And if she did, he was heard to say, she had already passed the test of life by far. Her mother kept on heaving sighs of relief.

She wanted Kabi to go on studying until she earned a degree. Degree was a famous word in those days. Degree in Makerere. Sometimes it was pronounced *digrii* like a donkey. Digiri. Many people had no idea what it really was, this degree business. They feared it because some people earned degrees from Communist Russia. Wakabi was cautious that Wa Ngai would suddenly say something terrible. And so was he wary, for every now and then he kept asking Kabi “Have I erred? Have I made a mistake, *iiii*?”

Aris left the girls’ sagging bed to Kabi and Wam and the little baby. But the room was dark. No windows could be opened at any time, night or day. As soon the windows were refashioned with mud; they collapsed into lopsided unmanageable openings.

The opening in the girls’ room, the hole was the window. Only a big plank of wood much like a door going all the way to the ground and up diagonally to the top, covered the hole. It was slid along to open and back again. It was dangerous as it could swing on its own. No fasteners held it. Sometimes it fell. The house was not too far

from the hedge that separated it from the village path and someone could put in their hand, slide the wooden plank and open it from the outside. There was no gate to close the fine hedge.

Trembling at the thought of a hand throwing down the plank, Kabi remembered that there were seven crooked rails and one could not jump into the room. Still Wakabi took a Somali sword which was under Wa Ngai's side of the bed. She could protect her own if he was drunk at night and robbers came. Every night she checked that it was in the right place and well sharpened. It was the only thing that glittered in her bedroom. She put old tins on cords and hang them behind the doors and the plank blocking the window in the girl's room at night. They jingled. In case a stranger moved them she would wake up. She had made her own alarm. Everyone felt better.

There was plenty of air in the house. It came through the gap between the roof and the walls of the house. There was no ceiling. In the night, the iron sheets appeared like a dark sky with holes poked into them. On very sunny days, the sunshine visited the rooms with sharp rays in which moving particles of dust shone like gold in the shadowy areas of the house, each particle telling the story of its own rise and fall; and sometimes its song in life, until another one took over, rose slowly and disappeared.

Nights came and Wakabi and her people slept and awoke, slept and awoke several times before one night was over. They had to keep watch. Sometimes waking and sleeping in one night seemed endless.

Somewhere in the magic of the night, they dreamt as do all the people that on this earth dwell. No morning failed to come because the people had slept hungry or poorly. Time adapted itself to pain. It seemed it took longer for the morning star to find its way but it came and there was one day less to the end of the month. Wakabi's salary was used for everything. It was never enough. Everywhere in the homes of the ordinary folk, people 'fought' to survive. It was no different in the city.

In the Great Rift Valley the sun tanned people tumbled out of good beds. After long and warm showers, they left to go bird

watching. They are talking about this being the famed Garden, paradise at the beginning of religious time. Paradise because, they said, of the rapturous beauty of the animals and plants.

Nobody knew them here and they did not know anybody. They had come to see nature. The wild. They spoke for hours about the beauty of Kenya. They focused their binoculars further up and saw some swallows. Bed bugs did not know them. They slept in hotels owned by rich politicians. After bird watching they fed for hours on a buffet breakfast. They had paid dearly, they said.

The priest and the cobbler

People continued to talk about Kabi and her child. Jugus was getting bigger but the questions ‘Who fathered that child? Whose child is that?’ were heard often. The kind cobbler who had lost the fleshy parts of his legs to polio and who crawled to work on two pieces of fat leather under his hardened kneecaps always said he did not ask such foolish questions. He said he never joined in such idle talk. He was always ready to help Kabi. He offered to look after Kabi’s old shoes which she wore in the rainy season to walk to the bust stop in the morning. She used to slip them off and hide them in a hedge near the road. Now she had a place to keep them. Kabi would find them cleaned on her way back. She would change into them again to keep her school shoes dry and prolong their durability.

He often told her she could leave anything that was too heavy there on her way from school. He told Kabi not to worry. Not to worry about the baby and life. He said in case of emergency she could put the baby in a basket and leave him there with a warm milk bottle. The cobbler would look after the baby. He said he had no feet but his hands were open to help her. His chest was broad and strong, his smile unforgettable. His kind eyes were round and seemed to roll with soft tears reminding one of the thoughtful search in a toad’s own eyes.

The cobbler knew that life was not stories. He knew his own life. He was rescued from a pit latrine hours after his birth. His aunt told him how he was rescued. A man who went to the toilet saw him, the little child crying in the waste, just before he pulled down his trousers. This man ran back calling for help. The boy got polio some years after. Was he infected in the pit latrine, the world’s first bed for him? How he did not drown is a miracle but the same is told of other babies too.

Yet he loved to smile, laugh and repair shoes. He said that shoes told him that all humans were not as lucky as they thought. His

brother loved him. He bought him a donkey and a boy to guide it when he made some money. He put a pushcart to it. The cobbler and his barrel of water always sat in the cart. But nobody came out to cheer and greet the cobbler, or throw palms in his way. He was not the one who comes, they thought. He was too familiar to be blessed.

He cheered himself. He steered himself to own success. Before he got his donkey, the poor man, he was on his knees all year round. Even when it rained and red mud covered the ground like porridge; squelching under the feet of those who walked bare feet moving between their cold toes, he was on his hands and feet. He smelt the good earth and dog waste too. There were many stray brown dogs. They usually lay stretched out outside homes on hot afternoons. They bayed at the moon all night long. It was unpleasant to see human waste especially in the rain. He preferred the sight and smell of cow dung. It was always green. He feared donkey dung. He knew about tetanus.

The village priest often saw this man on his knees. The priest only sat back on the seat of his car driving as if his legs were being stretched out in the sun. Father knew that the cobbler had no children. That he was always praying in the act of crawling. He could not afford to let him in. That would mess his car up. Then that would spoil his white robes. He did not ask for his name. The cobbler never understood church teachings. He was always on the road. This was not the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. It was a road in a village in Kĩa in Afrika. He slept on Sundays. Seasons changed with rain, sun and wind in one day.

These were the wet days during which the priest's car, the only car of the village, would be stuck in the mud and pushed by many hands out of the road side gulleys where it would end up each time. Still the villagers said it was better to see him in the furrows. The car, they said was an improvement since back in the days the priest went riding high on an animal so strange to them: a horse.

The story of how Jokia the jockey was trained to ride horses by a priest for years was often told. Jokia learned well and he passed the

skill on to his own son. Later he rode a unique horse owned by Freedom, the prince, a politician. Other politicians copied the prince. A new tradition for politicians to own gemstones lions, farms, horses, planes, businesses, leopards, banks, cheetahs, schools, anything called property was started. Politicians made friends with priests. The people felt robbed and lashed with invisible whips. Christians sang they thought that politicians would go and loot the moon and then it would fall from on high.

The priest's car zigzagged on the earth road that led to the shopping center from the parish. The priests preached peace on earth. The nuns sang 'glory, glory in the highest' inside their convent. Their voices were icy but balanced on hearts that tried to be warm. In some schools, new songs were learnt.

"God loves a cheerful giver, give it all you've got! He loves to hear you laughing when you are in an awkward spot!" Sings Father.

Poverty as lack and deprivation of the body was praised. St. Francis and St. Clare had many babies named after them. And it was said that it was good to praise those who knew and loved poverty. They sang of holy Dominique.

*"Dominique, nique nique
over the land he plods along
and sings a little song
never asking for reward...never asking"*

They also sang in French. It did not matter that many of them did not know understand which land Dominique came from.. They were told this was a good man. He crossed Europe on foot from Scandinavia to Palermo in Italy, preaching the goodness of abject poverty. It was said that the poor would go to heaven despite their sins. *Lazyrus* was a poor man, a beggar. He would get a great seat in heaven.

One day, the priest's car was pulled out of a ditch near the home of a beautiful woman who lived near the Wa Ngai family. She lived alone. She was cheerful. It was said that Father loved her glowing face. No one allowed a conversation beyond that. But people spoke

about her *kamũthũngũ* daughter. They called her Kafatha. Father's own little one.

Like Kabi's baby, Kafatha could not be sang to and danced for. But the priest and the woman were not school children. Once his car was secure on the tarmac road on the way to Nairobi Father sped down to town to see a growing nation. People moved out of the way for him in the city as in the village.

"Give way. Let Father pass!" They say, moving anyone who stands in his way. They knew him by his Roman collar and white cassock. Woki the mad man who always blocked Father's path when he walked in the village was told off. The mad man was called a devil by the people.

"Let Father pass!" He would be shouted at. "Heeeh... weeh...*ndũreke batha abitũke! Ndweberie ngoma icio hau! Ngoma... ĩno!*" "Hey you, get out of Father's way, take your madness from there you spirit! "And Father passed and blessed them drawing the sign of the cross in the air.

Woki always chased Timo away whenever he saw him. It was instinctive. No sooner would he see him than he would raise his hands and run towards him with a stone he was ready to cast. Timo always had to run away. One day Timo ran and a wild wind entered his shirt filling it. He looked like a pregnant woman just about to give birth. Then he fell flat on his stomach on a hard mound of earth. The air did not hurt. His belly did. They say that was how he became impotent.

After that Woki used to shout at Timo very loudly. He would say,

"You dirt and nonsense, son of Timonini, take off your maternity dress! *Ruta!* Take off!" *Ruta!* He would say with loud emphasis. But one day he just smiled when he saw him and told him,

"You shall wear it for life, never taking it off, always nine months pregnant. Always! And impotent!" From that day, people stopped calling him mad. They nicknamed him the village Osiris God.

Cockcrow

A cock crowed to greet the dawn and to wake everyone up as if it was not sure people would really get up. It was as if it was the first morning of its life, it crowed with such vigor. The village was then quiet for a long time. No baby cried. Not a sound of bleating goats. It was as if the cockerel heard the deep silence invite it to crow again. Only the cockerel could be heard. Its song was followed by silence again. Why did the song of the cockerel remind Wakabi of her mother? Well, everything seemed to but she was dead. Everything was Naana's voice: the cry of the child, birds' songs, silence. Now there was only silence again. Maybe Naana wanted to seize this moment to say that she was wrong about Kabi.

Wakabi knew that the cockerel would soon be taken to town like many others and sold. That it would never come back home. It would be slaughtered. It would be served on a table. With things it had never seen with its keen eye before in its life it would be cut up, and laid on a shining dish. Crockery. Cutlery. White table linen. The cockerel had never seen such a floor, such a dining room and all those fixtures in good hotels inside kitchens and bathrooms. Just like Wakabi. She taught about many things she had learnt about and never seen. It was time for morning work.

Only the thud of the fall of a dull axe was heard, hitting a hard piece of wood. Bunt! bunt! bunt! Went the axe. With each blow, the tall woman's long back went up slowly, so did her hands, axe gripped firmly in both. Her hands went round her head that was covered with a green cloth that ended up in a neatly tied knot at the nape of the head. One bare foot gripped the long piece of wood and she hit it just right. Her second toe was longer than her great toe. That was Wakabi. The same one who arrived late many a nights bent over with her back too heavy laden with animal feed had to look after her husband, her children and her grandchild. She filled all spaces in the

life of the family.. Without her, the household, even when all her children were there, became a sad void.

Suddenly, Wakabi split the same piece of wood very fast and easily into equal parts. In her mind's eye, she could see what a lovely flame these would make. Where Wakabi's energy to carry on came from, was as mysterious as the journey of the glowworm by night. At cockcrow, Kabi was tired and still in that 'bed' holding her son who had cried all night. He slept on her chest still. He fed most of the night. Perhaps he was too cold.

Earlier in the morning, Wakabi had already walked for four miles alone with a barrel of water on her back. She had fetched it from distant river Uchungu. River Chi was nearer but had dried up. Being a poor rural girl and going to the city almost daily was a strange thing for Kabi but she had to learn to cope. Soon she would be up and working.

Wakabi's fire burns. The light dry wood chips take quickly to the fire and spread it to the bigger pieces of wood. The light wood was consumed to ashes but it left tea ready. In the entire village, nobody talked of breakfast. Breakfast was a show on radio. Breakfast show.

Their morning meal was called just morning tea. It was enough for all. It was all those who went out early to hew wood had. It was all that those who went before dawn to pick coffee had. It was all that those who run to school tasted. It was all they had for a morning start. Only breastfeeding mothers were fed on porridge. There was some for Kabi. It stayed a little longer in the stomach.

People spoke often about holding the stomach in place for a while. But nursing mothers too only had tea on the hard days of the month. It was just that they had more tea and had it more frequently. Sometimes on Sundays, there was some bread for the whole family. Kabi was good at slicing it so that nobody missed out. One was lucky to have two or three pieces of the white milky bread.

When she was alive, Naana used to say that the Afrikan sweet potato, yams or arrowroot tubers were better for the stomach but even those were scarcely to be found now. They had become a rare

delicacy. The land had been destroyed by alien fertilizers that slowly killed local foods.

After tea, the heavier pieces of the wood would one by one be pushed deep into the ashes. This way fire was saved. Matches were expensive and Wa Ngai carried his in the pocket of his trousers. The fire would be stirred up from the embers to cook food that would be stored salty and dry. Food to be eaten for the rest of the week. It was almost always, maize and beans.

Wakabi returned quickly to her room. She was busy in their mud walled bedroom tearing rags from an old piece of towel. No break from anything. Every month she found herself preparing such cloths. That time had come back fast like it always seemed to do. She had to outlive those long five days of a heavy period. The first day always seemed longer. It was most painful. She reasoned that she had to save money at all times for her children to afford to use cotton wool for their periods.

Wakabi had to do all her daily work. So she did. Rains came and returned to the heavens. When rain came back she was still working. She worked the miracles of multiplying food every day. She worked the miracle of having all the children in the family in school. She did.

The nightjar sang. The light of the moon shone. Stars twinkled. Glowworms preceded fire crackers. Kabi often said that conversations full of wisdom and the family *faya* threw light and warmth on Wakabi's journey of life.

Wa Ngai prided himself in the power of women that surrounded him; redeeming him. He could always afford a smile. Like men in different cultures and in many times and places, he never run out of money to buy alcohol in the village homes and shops. He had money to buy an expensive brand of cigarettes and time to smoke with friends and laugh heartily at everything, even their jokes about the past Mau Mau hard times.

Sometimes the men sat in circles and told stories during the day. One day one of them described the white man they called *Thũ Ndaya*. Tall Enemy. They all screamed, laughed and yelled at the same time

in different styles. But when they spoke about *Kimenderi*, a DC of their own ancestry, they went hysterical. Each one shouted something.

Weeee!

Kimenderi tamenya!

Ngaiiii!!!

Ngatho!

Kimenderi!

ŨŨiiiiii!

The way they pronounced these sounds cannot be written except in musical notes. They were said separately and yet together. The men were at different times and in various tones in one conversation. Hysteria. Mau Mau injuries ran deep beyond humor. Some of the men spontaneously began to act like preachers ‘saving’ people at Uhuru Park. They did not speak in tongues. They shouted in tongues.

“*Hiriürrrrrb! Hagessbbh!* Oh God! I say, put up your hand if you were in detention and are still alive!” All hands shot up. Then they all seemed to ‘die’ in silence.

Slowly they were conscious again. It was as if they came to back to themselves. It was after a long exit out of reality. “*Oiiii, Ngai, iiiii,* God of Black people, we the black people. God help black people! We were saved from that! Let us stand together and sing...” *Wiyaaath!* Self- rule. Kenyatta betrayed us! Where is our freedom?” One loud voice belted out.

Freedom was painful like that for them. It was the power of resistance that made them remain together. Independence found and left scars on everyone. Freedom, Uhuru was the name of the son of Jomo Kenyatta. The family could afford to call their child Freedom. *Uhuru*. Kenyans picked up names easily for their children. They did not name many children abstract nouns. Unity, Peace, Love and Freedom were not here with two feet. Such names were absent on school registers.

Artists at university and other students began to go back to their non-Christian names. And dress? Some women danced in Jogoo, or

cockerel attire made when at Independence one party led the country. Tiers and tiers of material so colorful made into big whirling skirts that looked like cakes. They swirled in twisting movement as they reached the ground. In their song they begged Jogoo, the cockerel, to sit them down and dance with them at the same level. But the cockerel, Jogoo, sat high up on the political podium. The women danced down below on the carpet with its image.

Girls spend hours making stiff skirts from twigs. They wear them to resemble the Queen of England whose name they wrote in minor letters: *kwini ithabethi*.

Somewhere along the way, Kaunda suit appeared and disappeared from the wardrobes of the rich. Pinstripes suits were in. Second hand clothes from Europe were said to redeem the poor. School uniform was the most spoken about attire.

Oh, what a night!

He sits in his cubicle. They call it a *kinbu* at home and, cubbie at school, a separate room all boys had a right to at home. The are covered with pictures of his heroes: John Gacy Wayne, The Boston Strangler, The Ripper. He played music very loudly turning up radio volume to hear it. He had some pictures of some singers. Musicians: The Jackson Five. Their Afro power balanced Elvis Presley's dazzling buckles. Percy Sledge gazed at Timo's eyes accusingly. Timo knew many songs well. He stood accused of loving no one, but, abusing many. It was not possible to abuse one and love many or to abuse many and love one.

Then there were boxers. He Timo used these too to fake his own power. He felt the blows right in his body when he saw boxers Mohammed Ali and Joe Frazier in the ring. He pretended they all fought against him.

At this time, Timo puffed out smoke peacefully. Novels to be read he said, were mainly NJames Harndley Chenz ones. He had many James Hadley Chase titles piled up in a corner. They were all dog-eared.

"Here's your supper," Progress said.

"Set it right here carefully, right in front of my mouth." He demanded like a chief. His saliva was dripping down.

"Thank you," Timo answered.

"Tomorrow, you will fetch it yourself!"

The door made a cracking sound. It closed swiftly. His moistened lips trembled and he mumbled something. There was the chicken breast and two thighs.

His sister did not feel good at having to serve him food. She felt humiliated. She was critical. Thoughts filled her mind. Tradition allowed for men to be spoiled like this. It was normal, many thought.

In boarding schools- the best schools in the country were boarding ones- senior girls had their own cubbies. But the walls there were as plain as school uniforms, uncreative. Boys also had cubbies at school. So boys had two cubbies sometimes. But these walls are his at home. He did what he wished in there.

Last time she dared tell him off when she found young girls giggling in his *kinbu*. Hmm! She thought, men were made lions by tradition and women helpless. They roamed, the men, where they willed. She started to refuse to serve him food in there. She was angry. Why? She asked, why.

Men did not fit into a lion's image. Progress remembered a folktale about a hyena. At a crossroad, the animal raised its mouth and nose to find out where a sweet aroma came from. He was very hungry. It came from both sides. He chose to take the two paths, one for each foot. He split in the center dying instead of finding and eating anything. But tradition had not admonished men, she thought.

Why should a woman have to eat the neck of a chicken? Why the scraggy legs and not the thighs? Not the breast? In some places, women and children sometimes missed out on all meat. Soft eggs, food on a table, spoons and forks, alcohol and cigarettes were for men. They were the new Brit masters.

Ancestors were surely not like this! Governors. They loitered around as women suffered battered backwards by traditions and forwards by modern ways.

Young men owned books and safely watched King Kong on big screens twiddling a tiny girl with his fingers in the local field. 'Maendeleo, trend... Being trendy and up -to -date was to be like this. Only for men.

Timo, a father of many unknown children relaxed as he fished a bottle of a local brew called Tweng from one of his little cupboards. After his meal, he lay down and listened to a late night music program - Late Date. It was broadcast on the English Service. He drifted off to sleep comfortably. He dreamed of his last dance and night in another disco, with a woman whose name he never

knew...and the radio played on as he slept leaving it on,” Oh, what a night!” He celebrated December 1963 with beer and girls. The national anthem went into one ear and out through the other. He had to prove he was enjoying all things such as drinks and ...girls. The boom, boom, boom of the music on radio was softer than his snoring.

“You know I didn’t even know her name!” He liked to repeat when he sang this song on his own. But Kabi was a girl whom Timo knew earlier and well. She was his neighbor. He was a teacher in a different school from Wakabi’s but he met her on village paths and in education meetings. He saw Wakabi cheering games.

He had known how Wakabi often spoke about her tribulations with her friends. He knew her passion for the education of the girl with a limp and all girls. He knew she had risked her life for the girl with a limp. Everyone in the village knew that.

He had known Kabi’s mother, her father, her sisters and brother for a long time. He knew Wa Ngai’s weaknesses exposed to the village by alcohol that laid him bare for all to see.

He had heard how Wa Ngai and others fought for freedom. He knew the tremor of innocence in Kabi’s voice. It expressed, that quiver, a deep longing for success. Kabi had not registered her own warm vibration when she spoke about the future innocently after her ‘O’ Levels and before he had destroyed her.

But now, her voice was dry and cracking, it was filled with pain. Tremulous. Lovely things for her baby, her excellence in education, her love for scones- which she never did get a treat of again from the convent- did not mean her pains had past. There were many times that her emotions were still very raw. She felt hedged in and choked up. At a time like that she lost the memory of joy and of a bird singing. There was a deep pain in her. She wanted to extirpate Timo’s hatred, his indifference. This she wanted more than the kiss of hope.

One day after her first few classes at University, Kabi told her mother that they should kill Timo. In her mind Wakabi saw the

image of a snake that pops its head out of a dark hole and hides just as fast. Wakabi did not respond. She felt confused not being able to say either 'yes' or 'no' to Kabi. When she tried to speak Kabi, her daughter could hear the refusal in her early words and read it on her face. Kabi run off from sight and was hidden from her mother behind the house. Wakabi was nervous.

Wakabi had no hope of sharing this with Wa Ngai. She feared that he would take the little money elders gave to a family to make up for rape. She could not imagine that. It felt shameful. In her mind, that money was dirty. Kabi dreaded to hear about money as reparation for her child and herself. Maybe if he helped pay for Jugus' needs it would have been better. No, not even that would work. Nothing would do. A goat offered to make amends would be even worse. Who would feed such a creature of pain? A container of honey would be like gall.

Kabi felt again that she had taken too much. She just wanted to throw all this up, vomit. It was not the poverty or lack of money killing her. No. It was the one of her stolen life. The pain locked her in a tight and dark place. Yet she felt her real self was the strong woman in her. She badly wanted to leave that sad place but her son confirmed she was there to stay.

Timo was safe. He had nothing to do with it all. His relatives were rich and could pay bribes. No one had taken the British Empire to court for colonialism so far. The people did not imagine their efforts to complain would any day bear fruit. But he was just Timo getting on with life. This is what Kabi felt she had to break: that easy life, that strong irresponsibility, that attitude.

The baby's good or poor health, food today, future schooling were all as distant to Timo's mind as was the Gobi Desert, which he taught pupils about, far from the green, green hills and valleys of their homeland. Shame was not in his repertoire of words.

He boasted to his friends. He put it this way. He said the famous three elders, like the three wise men to Jesus baby should be sent to him if anybody had an axe to grind with him. The three elders were

to be three men who had all sacrificed a goat, *mburĩ ya kĩa*, on which all the other accepted men had feasted, to be recognized as members of the elders' group. These men would be sent to Kabi's father who was a member -accepted with all his weaknesses as alcohol abuse was 'blessed', as a tendency in men- and they would bring stipulated cash. A few shillings or a little goat kid, for what was referred to as 'breaking a girl's leg!

Timo was not yet an elder by the goat production and the men certainly would not believe his crime. Word of his deed travelled from Woki the mad man to some minds. Some of them said he just behaved as a man should. Why did the girl let him? They asked. Did they forget how their wives were raped during colonial times? Did they not know that the rape of girls among some groups led to the wiping out of entire villages and people in them? Did they not see their land bleeding red with colonial rape? No one took this for what it was. Theft. Murder.

Girls, they said, needed taming. For being there. For being attractive. Like land. Lying coastal and warm like a natural beach. Higher land too was desecrated for being 1 500 meters above sea level, having fine weather. Bed springs. Perpetual spring. Girls were at fault you see, for being fertile, like land. For being dressed like this or like that? Traditional women wore a mini leather skirt with a slit to the groin. Was it that girls were seen as a land that has good vegetation? Myths. So, men's sexual desires had to be unleashed. They could not be controlled, they said. Like greed. Colonialism. Imperialism. Capitalism.

That morning Kabi was leaving early for school. She felt a cold dewdrop fall on her right upper foot. She rubbed it off. Here dew was not of the romance of drops on a beautiful red petal of a rose flower. Here, dew ate people between their toes and nibbled on their souls. It hurt to split dew in the morning with bare feet. This dew had sharp edges. No one ever thought it had a mouth, serrated like a saw. Dew shone like a moon but it brought blood. Kabi went to school early and dew ate her toes every day. Her rubbers, as they called

them, the ones she wore to go to the city, were letting in water. The cobbler could not dry them. Wetness disturbed her like it never had before. Today Jugus was unwell.

On her way to the *matatu* stop Kabi feels as if her life swivels and she is in a constant race and sometimes not on both her feet. She felt as if she did some cartwheels too. It was normal for her to change from feeling like a pillar of strength to a helplessness that made her want to throw herself on the ground. She had internalized contradiction.

It was Aris who met Timo strolling to the kiosk to buy cigarettes. She would let him know that all her sisters shared Kabi's pain. That all the sisters were very angry with him. Mad. Together they were strong and did not fear his power. That if the District Commissioner was corrupt then they could speak to the Education Officer. Her two sisters had told Kabi that one day they would do something for her. That they would need Noa and her Mini. Aris privately spoke to Noa. Nothing else was said. Noa was a woman who drove a Mini.

Kabi and her sisters never called anybody names or started fights. Aris was determined that Timo should know something. She knew what his answers to her questions would be. But she would try.

"The baby is unwell," said Aris, raising her voice.

"What has that got to do with me? Am I its mother? You say you are educated in your family. Give him *medziine*," answered Timo.

"Go to the DC! Go to the Chief! Run for protection now," Said Aris.

"Does the DC hold the sky? Who is a Chief? Am I the one who makes the rain fall?" Asked Timo.

"You are rude and crude!" Said Aris.

"Try *your* helpless father, if he is your father anyway. I've *ngotta ngo* right on," Said Timo. He was speaking with what he called Amelican English. Aris was angry. She stuck out her tongue at him and raising her right with palm shaped like the paws of a lion and her nails sticking out like claws in front of her, she thrust her wrist forward. It was as if she was scratching him from a distance. Then she raised her

left hand to equal level and thrust her clawy palms at his back for a good two minutes. “May the soil reject you!” She cried. In the last instance she spat towards his direction even though he had vanished. The spit flew to the West. This was a curse. She changed direction and went opposite his.

Kabi was on the move again. She thought about her life. Her child. Her studies. Her chances. She was on the dangerous journey back to the city. As she got immersed in her Geography lesson, however, all the tension somehow faded away. Her inner voice told her to be at peace for the day. She trusted the women at home would know what to do. She forgot about Jugus’ fever.

Coffee bushes

It is still early on the same morning. Aris who was waiting to join a Technology College, looked down the valley below her. Her hands itched to work. At this time of the morning, and even earlier, all such coffee farms were covered as if by armies. Small drops of dew fell from the coffee bushes wetting the whole hands of those who worked on them. The berries were a sharp red color with shades of green and orange. When the berries became orange merging with red, there was a hint of gold. An undisturbed coffee bush with its dark green leaves and its branches laden with red berries shone with little dewdrops.

It was so even at Mr. N. Sorry's farm. The people called it *Gwa Thore* and Mr. White White's was locally known as *Kwa Wati*. The people named their bosses in their own language. The extensive land of coffee bushes was covered with women, men and children. You could see their movements in the leaves. A yellow cardigan here and there stuck out in the green. She watched carefully how the bushes danced.

From far, the coffee branches looked as if they moved up and down in protest. From close by, however, every leaf seemed to enjoy getting stroked and each coffee berry which swelled the *debes*, tin containers, caressed as the brain in the fingers and eyes selected the best of the berries endlessly. The people already had berry -red eyes from work.

There were two people to every coffee bush, four hands. They worked like bees. It maybe that they felt like ants but they knew how much land had been taken from them. In traditional stories small animals knew the universe. Some people were heard lamenting about and saying, "We have no land!" Land deprivation led to family feuds ending in death by machete.

Aris and the others worked ceaselessly to pick as much coffee as possible. It was a very hard task to fill up one big tin whose weight

the people did not quantify but knew in their flesh. Placed on the ground, the container rose up to one's knee. All the berries should have ripened together as they fed from the same red soil and were bathed by the same sun and irrigated jointly. Green, red and then black berries. Here was nature with some hidden messages in the rays of the sun that penetrated the deep. Were not all the fallen rotting berries bloodied tears of women under the bushes watering the earth for fertility?

By the time one picked only ripe red berries, not mixed with green or semi ripe ones which had to be left safely on the branch to fill half a tin, the picker's skin on the fingers was already peeling off. Skin that had grown afresh would be peeled off again and again. When each *debe* filled it was emptied into a sack. Sometimes women tied a small bag around their waist, filled it and poured it into the tin, for it was hard to move with *debes*. Women bent down in skirts at their own risk. It was better to do it less. One was always aware that Bwana Nyapara, the overseer, would be there anytime with a ready whip. It was hard. It was humiliating to see the tall guy whipping his own 'mothers' and 'daughters' because his master was soon coming down to inspect the job done so far before he went for his ritual mid-morning tea. He flogged his 'fathers' and 'sons' too. His people. Bwana Nyapara defended none of them. He was his master's hand.

Downing a cup of coffee held daintily between silver painted varnished fingers, alternating the cup with a thick cigar, somewhere in a rich city one would not hear the cries of laborers, nor understand why coffee is red for the workers. Red. Not to be sipped. A blood diamond, it brought very little money back to the black coffee nation. Coffee lined up the pockets of those who have as with ivory. The poor got humiliating money from it. Trading ivory was banned in some parts of the world, because it threatened elephants to extinction. People did not seem to get extinct and coffee could not be banned.

Birds perched on still coffee branches. They tried to sing. Then when they picked the scent of chemical spray they flew away terrified.

It was deadly. So the human beings could carry on. Deadly. It was easier to pluck all the berries ripened together in a bunch than to pluck one or two and leave the half green and golden ones on the stem. That was hard chess.

In the cold village homes, lone old women and children try to manage their lives as they ward off sticky flies. Just like in the days the British forced labor in the villages. Harsh life was in the camps of torture that were reserve villages. They suffered in silence. Fettered. Rotting. A deep-seated anger brewing. Many boys refused to go to school. It was common to hear the sentence, “that one has come out of school, he has refused!”

The boys sat in small groups for many hours in village crossroads. They dreamed together of a better future. They talked and played and then got bored. They sometimes played armies that could overthrow governments. They made presidents of themselves in drama. They never did house chores. They refused to pick coffee. They went home, ate and sometimes beat up their sisters and mothers.

The boys called one another ‘Chief’, ‘*Mkubwa*’, ‘*Nyapara*’ then, *Amiri jeshi*, *Mkuu wa majeshi*, *Bokasa* ‘jenerali’, ‘*Idi*’ ‘Colonel Gad’ and ‘Seargent *sajja*’. None was called *Kimaathi*. There was one tall boy called Pasteli for pastor. School was not compulsory. Some older children felt uncomfortable going to classes with younger ones. When those who made it went to class, many of them failed exams. In the last primary school years, everything got darker as they could not cope with the subjects in the English language. They fared poorly in Kiswahili and Mathematics too. How would they study science later?

They abandoned schooling. For those who remained in class for many years, schools only produced one pupil who qualified to go to a good secondary school. The others returned to the farms of Sorry, White and Chief. Wakabi and other teachers killed themselves with work to see if some day, their pupils would make it. Many started to speak of Kabi’s amazing achievements.

Aaaa Hūra Kíssí!

Wakabi was in her mud walled classroom teaching Math. She added one box to another and the children learned numbers. That was Standard One. After a year she would move up with her class to Standard Two; and again after a year to Standard Three. Then she would leave them to go higher to Standard Four with other teachers. She was very good with children.

Wakabi wrote carefully in her book. Little lines cutting deep into her thumb and the palm could be seen. They were filled with the brown color of earth. They were rough and now filling with white chalk dust. They were the marks of her work on land and work at school. Her own children and most people were proud of her. She planned well. She taught well. She spoke well.

“MATHEMATICS 25.05.1984

Standard 3J

Aim: To teach the pupils multiplication by two digit numbers

Ref: PM Page 69

Presentation 27

X14 We multiply 27 by 4 ones which gives us 108. 270

108

and 27

X10 Then we multiply 27 by 10 which gives us 270

270

and 270

+108 Then we add.

378

The Children will work out the exercise on the page.”

“In GHC the children learn the work done by the government representatives such as: The Chief and the Sub-chiefs, the Agriculture Officer, Health Inspector, Doctor, Nurse, Clinical Officer in government institutions.”

Later they would learn about the police, the District Commissioner, the Provincial Commissioner. All these represented the Government. The Government was a strange thing full of laws and punishment. It was everywhere. It was in the School Inspector who often drove to school to supervise in order to fail most teachers. Wakabi passed.

In Kiswahili I teach about *upendo* and *wivu*. Love and jealousy. Fluency in three languages was important: Mother Tongue, English and Kiswahili. Christian Religious Education was taught through questions. It was an interesting syllabus that included Physical Exercise. P.E was popular. At lunch -time Wakabi took cold tea from an old cooking oil bottle. The oil was called salad oil. She had washed the bottle well and kept it for use.

The children at school were hungry. She taught them a song. They went home. She rushed to change and left alone to labor on her land. Aris was working for money to survive. Wam stayed at home with Jugus. She held the baby close to her chest. She felt protection. She did not speak much.

That evening, by the time Kabi came home, Aris had come by and bought Suta tablets, a powdery pinkish pill that disappeared from the market later and which was prescribed for everything. Wakabi carefully pronounced it as *penisilini*. It was a great one for bacterial infections.

She put two round pills inside a deep steel table spoon. Aris took the second spoon and laying its bottom on the pills crushed the tablet turning the spoon clockwise. It broke into big parts and then she continued to turn the spoon until it was a fine powder. What was important was to keep the powder from slipping out of the deep spoon. She had seen Wakabi doing it. She added a little water to the powder. She made a little paste. She added a little more water. The

syrup for Baby Jugus was ready. He gulped it down happily but sneered and then gave a big cry. She soothed him close to her chest.

Aris dented her savings for which she slaved away and told no one about. Some dirty cash in a torn hanky had cured the baby. Here money was always filthy. The people often said that smelly money was money and a treasure. Life depended on money. If it was sometimes counted in the toilet for safety, they added, how could you tell? You would take it even then. Life and money, perhaps for the stinking rich this was no secret. Same tradition.

The cobbler always took his money with both hands after repairing old shoes. He thanked the customer, his boy helper, his donkey and his brother. Hands have to get dirty to earn money he repeated often. Aris' hands were scraped by coffee branches. She carried heavy tins, she was hurt by falls. But she was determined that one day she would settle down on her own piece of land and house. For that she worked tirelessly. At the technical college, she was going to study carpentry.

Aris did not bother think about a man to take care of her in the way that most women expected a husband to. She missed school to work many times but she was good at catching up. Society was changing fast. A nurse friend of Wakabi came by to see Jugus. She said he was doing fine. She brought all the women some iron tablets. She cried endlessly, the nurse did, about her husband who got married to someone new every four months. She said she wanted to sue him but did not have the name for the crime he had committed. Songs on radio were about endless love. A teacher sued her husband for abandoning his matrimonial home. Bigamy was mentioned. If Aris got a husband, she hoped she would remain independent. Own money.

Many men seemed to look for progressive women whose pockets would cushion them after wasting their money on male pleasures of city life. Wearing a tie was part of being a man. Part of being human, it seemed. Modern ways in the big cities continued to attract most people.

The topic of being a wife was often on the lips of the girls. For Wam too, like many women in the village, faith was the work of her hands; not a creed to recite. She would not be a second or third wife. No. Not like Ronika her school friend who shocked them all. Ronika was intelligent and then one holiday, she went home from boarding school and she never returned. Wam and her friends were told that she became the third wife of a wealthy businessman at the coast province. He was a famous Sugar Daddy who had tricked many girls. Beds and money. The girls were always many years younger than his old and wrinkled body. His stomach stretched out far in front of him. Hūra Kissi was his name. ‘Kiss me. Aaa, hūra kissi! Kiss me! Harder!’ He used to say.

Wam kept on seeing the face of Ronika. She always seemed wise, innocent and focused. She wondered where that part of her that could be easily cheated was hiding when she was in school. That *her* that dared travel to the coast on such a long ride with an elderly man. Life was so unpredictable. All Ronika had complained about at school was the other wife of her father whom she never called ‘small mother’. Her mother was suffering since this other wife came in to the picture. This other wife always had better food to eat and clothes to wear. Wam did not expect to hear that Ronika thought a third wife would get even more money than all the other wives.

On the following Saturday morning, Aris came to help again, she fetched all the water Kabi needed to wash her son’s clothes at home. Water was kind and very soft with baby clothes. No. With all clothes, even those dirty ones that people wore to go coffee picking and which were packed with a slippery dark dirt, especially at the shoulders where sacks of coffee berries were placed. These clothes were washed in the river. Water knew many secrets. The human waste of drunken men washed like baby nappies by their wives, it knew too. The river knew many sad things. Perhaps that is why it run all its life, always flowing. And yet the moon smiled in it. The river twinkled back after cleaning itself. And a bird flew over the water as

if listening to words of the music of the river. It swooped down and kissed the water in the river.

Nostalgia

Kabi was hanging the washing out to dry, when a look at a little pair of Jugus' shorts brought tender memories of her brother Atia. He had lived for many years far from home adopted by an Italian artist of the Bernini family in Italy. Giacomo Bernini, lived in Malindi on the Kenyan coast and in Italy. Giacomo's wish was to assist Atia get educated.

Giacomo saw how others living in Malindi only brought young people to harm. He was keen to do something better. He saw Atia's painting displayed outside the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi during a school festival and at once chose to support him.

Exhibiting Atia's work had been Mother Mirella's idea. She knew that since colonialism and religion came to Afrika life was greatly disturbed. She knew it even as she prayed, taught, did her daily chores and sang *guarda questo amore, guarda noi signore*. Look at this love, look at us Lord.

Not many families took their children abroad without help. Behind well educated families there were many people. There were many women educated by nuns from Europe. Mother Mirella loved Wakabi whom only she called Josephine Wa Ngai. She loved her virtuous ways. Wakabi was indeed a woman of great courage and strength. Her son was gifted. Everything seemed fine. Church and mafia were separated, were they not?

It was many years later that Giacomo Bee -as the people called him in Malindi -was found to be a drug dealer of the highest level in the world. A drug baron. Giacomo said that was better than being *mafioso*. Atia cut all connections. He hoped he would remain safe. Sista Mirella did not ever find out about this. If only she had tried to, she would have got a real shock for Giacomo was a cousin she never got to know because she went to a convent.

Atia lived and went to school in Grottaferrata, a small village outside of Roma and near the nine villages called Castelli Romani,

among which was Castel Gandolfo. Nonas and Nonos, grannies and grandpas aged and chatting at many instances of the Mass used to smile and stare at him curiously. He was almost always the only teenager in church.

On the way to church, Italians young and old used to get close to him to feel his hair – *“i capelli bello, ma che bello!”*, they would exclaim as they run their hands through it. Then they got used to him. They learned that he was not a rescued slave and that, no, he was not going to be a priest.

One granny cried. She said she was sorry that he was called *babbuino*, a baboon and *imbecile* by some people on the streets of The Eternal City. Atia could not yet return home. In a village so far away from Italy where the bird sang, his parents and siblings missed him. He was their distant beacon of hope; another child of the nightjar.

His mother Wakabi used to think that perhaps the lone glowworms she saw at night knew how to travel to Italy. That perhaps they went to see Atia and then came back to her on her lonely walks home to tell her all was well.

While the nightjar sang out in the dark, she often dreamt that she flew so lightly and fell gently on the back of a glowworm at night. She was lighter than it. She went on to feel that the glowworm took off higher with her and flew quietly tearing through the dark night taking her to a special place. Dewdrops, not sweat, would fall on her but the cold would not harm her.

The glowworm flew for many, many miles and glowed more, but just when she began to see other lights, lights not of glowworms but of the Eternal City, just when she begun to see a house where she felt strongly attracted by Atia’s presence- no one had told her where he lived- the glowworm would begin to come down as if trying to get parallel to the ground. It would land in a marsh. She was awake. She was still on the old thin and torn mattress very close to the ground. Wa Ngai snored hard beside her his legs sprawling everywhere. She loved and hated the dream. It gave her hope and it caused her pain.

Kabi still went to wash the rest of the family laundry at the river after cleaning her son's clothes in the morning that Saturday. This is the price she paid for her son being looked after by all. She was Kabi the dhobi, or washer. But she enjoyed what she could.

Kabi loved watching the water of river Uchungu dash over the smoothened rocks, split into foam and become water again but this time Uchungu had less water. She felt pain. Villagers would have to dig more boreholes and walk longer in all directions to look for water. Kabi had once spoken about how future generations would pay dearly for the way rivers were abused. "One day, there will be no water because we are killing nature," She had said.

Kabi stands barefoot on the warm rock. She feels good. She lifts her skirt and feels the warm rays of the sun on her thighs. She is happy. She looks at all that village washing that smiles at the sun as if begging to be dried. It lies all over the green grass and on some bushes. And the yellow big dress that shines there, she wonders, was it that dress that touched by one ray of light became the sun's own bridal robe?

Kabi's spirit is lifted higher than her skirt. Nature's burdens fall. The heavens clap for those few seconds. She can breathe and grab the rhythm of happy nature riding on the wings of a carefree sky. Not a scarecrow in sight. Her bird can sing. In the valley, a patch of green huge arrowroot leaves hold their color to her, they toast health to her. Deep down she senses a rebirth.

She never ceased to marvel at this. The sight of crystal clear water held in an arrowroot leaf and moving around it in happy drops that hold the sky in them, dazzles her. How clean and rich could nature be? She felt healed. The nightjar sings. Sings to Kabi, the earth's plants, bushes and trees: *Kwĩ beboĩĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ*. The song holds a promise for two, a promise divine.

Super cleaner

For all the villagers, the river Uchungu carried away the dirt of the week. Upon the hill was a famous and only church for miles around. The cross on the pinnacle of this church was set against a kind blue sky. People went to the river to wash clothes on Saturday mornings.

In the afternoon as the clothes dried, some went to church to confess their sins; none of which were about any disagreement with water or trees. The priest sat in the wooden confessional. Sometimes he was entertained, sometimes furious but finally exhausted. Piles of all their sins sounded the same. These were firm believers. They broke all the commandments but spoke about it to the priest who forgave them. The dirt of the clothes went down the river. The dirt of the spirits was to be disinfected by the priest. There were two priests attending. No one dared mention *Kafatha*, the child of the priest in the confessional. Those who felt they had judged the priest and sinned made no mention of it. Those who thought he had done a good thing were even more silent.

Maybe the attraction to confess had a distance connection with the cleansing rituals of their ancestors. In those days, forbearers did not clean only with words. Ritual works were important. People in need of cleansing were known to the community; they were sprayed with the liquid from the dirty entrails of sheep. It was said they were hit with that stuff, and they became clean. Dirt cleansed dirt.

Those were fully traditional days. Things had changed. The people looked at everything keenly. It did not take them long to say that there was no difference between the missionary and the colonialist. They often said it in a proverb “*Gũtirĩ mũthũngũ na mũbĩa*”. There is no white man and priest, they are the same.

No public ceremony was done to exorcise colonial demons. Sin was not public anymore. Kabi was angry about this. What if Timo got interested in church and the priest forgave him his sin? Some

governors went to confession. Catholic politics was rife. Protestant politics too. Had politicians and others who stole from the land found a different way of laundering their consciences? Kabi had much on her mind. She remembered that people in detention camps were encouraged to confess their sins to Father.

Kabi lived in Catholic territory. Only those who recognized their sins went to confession. Numbers of church-goers increased. People seemed to follow others in being born, living and dying. They did the same in going to church to confessions and Mass on Sundays. A small group began to turn up for daily Mass too.

Confessions were private but girls shared their pain. They confessed having sex when they had been raped. The priest told them not to do that again. He was harsh even if shy about the topic. He asked many questions. He told girls to wear proper clothes, long ones. Nobody told him that their ancestors had not been afraid of nakedness.

No community was shamed and cleansed for raping women. No community was cleansed and shamed for robbery. The church did not do that. The government did not do that. Tradition fought back. Many People began to affirm traditional beliefs again. They were forced to set aside their dealings with spirits. A woman was compelled to bury all her power tools in the grave of her husband when he suddenly died. They said she had forces that the church feared. The land had not known this kind of fear before.

The colonial constitution of Kenya was in place. It was negotiated in Lancaster House by one woman, Priscilla Abwao and men such as Martin Shikuku, Tom Mboya and Kenyatta. Laws prohibited murder and theft and other evils. Theft of land continued. Some people lost faith in their traditional laws. Some penalties ceased to be. No one was put in a beehive to be set on fire and rolled down a hill after stealing. Yet the people did not find faith in the court of law.

The priest sat in the box and took all the dirt works committed in thought, words and deeds instead. He also took the invisible

omissions. He never joined the village elders to make judgments. He was not in the Chief's *baraza*- the occasional public meeting- but only talked from the pulpit. Evil spread like terrible weed. Everyone said he had promised to hear but not to tell. Everyone knew who raped, stole or lied but no one knew. The psyche of a people was changing. No one faced a single direction steadily. But baptism was still said to clean all sins of all people who went for it. In time, politicians preferred a big crowd to watch them thrown into water in silent baptismal confession. Boys escorted girls to confession to keep them 'safe'.

But these boys and men often had no time for Mass. The image of a priest frightened them. Frightened anyone. They were always fewer than the girls there. Sometimes it was different, but often Fatha gave them heavy penances such as reciting the rosary. People began to wear rosaries around their necks to confess their faith. It was easier than to confess sin. It was easier than to pay tax. The priest did not demand from them to make public utterances. He could not. He would be violating the secrecy of the soul and the conscience, not even under the pain of death would he speak and this he had vowed. But many Mau Mau detainees knew different. People continued to go to confession and to leave their sins with the priest.

Back at the river, Kabi listened again. She heard the night - bird sing in the shining afternoon. Her eyes searched fast. She saw it come to her, again. She was disturbed. It kissed her lips and forehead and disappeared with its song in the trees. She wondered what its message was this time. That was the only time in her life that she saw that bird during the day. It was angry.

Suddenly Kabi screamed. She was not singing like the night - bird. She did not see or hear anything. Some people abandoned their work in nearby land patches and ran as if chasing her. She had not known there were so many people working around. Some souls run out of the church too down the valley they swooped like sparrows. They saw her in flight climbing the next ridge and down the valley she flew. She ran faster than the wind. Nobody could keep up with

her. She went running straight to Timo's house, the house. He still lived in the little *kinbu*. It was not firmly built.

She brought down the door first with kicks and then with her bare hands began to tear things off wooden walls. Nobody knew that she had attended self-defense workshops in the city. She had not time to waste. She tore his teaching certificate off as he stood there silent. She peeled off all the posters. She took the matchbox from the windowsill. Timo looked confused. She kicked the wall near him and it fell outwards. He had to do something.

"Help! Help!" Timo cried.

Then suddenly he could not move or speak. Kabi's friend Noa, the first woman to own a car, a Mini, drove in.

Timo managed to say: "Help! Help! Women in a mini finish me!" and then his voice disappeared again.

Wam run in screaming. It was as if she was a raiding aircraft. Timo was arrested in a Mini car. Kabi had read about citizens' arrest and talked to Noa about it. Timo was driven to the District Education Commissioner. All the villagers knew was that Timo was not a teacher anymore and by order. His dirty beard grew in jail cells.

Nobody could stop Woki, the man they called mad from celebrating. Woki told that story for years. "Timo was a teacher who was arrested in a Mini by three formidable women, so that he could eat his punishment!"

This story is still told today. If you go on a quiet afternoon and meet some old men in that village, they will tell you stories about women who swam against the current. They will tell you about their struggle against sale of alcohol by people supported by politicians. They will tell you about politicians and cheap drinks. That they have poured barrels of cheap alcohol which made their men blind and it flowed on village paths and roads. They tell stories of women who brought change.

These women tell these stories as they drink tea with good milk. At home they have eggs, honey and fruits and enough money to enjoy.

Once again Kabi's name became a by-word in the village. She had proven something with her life. She became the most powerful girl for the villagers. How did she feel? She remembered how much she had suffered. How much she had endured. Kabi, had 'eaten' much ridicule. It was as if it had been her daily bread. She knew well her path had changed for life. Intense pain that did not finish her founded her strength.

She was now in front of the Kenya University College. She hurried on. She stood on the campus on high green ground and sometimes watched the moon in the sky at day time. She was a non-resident. Some days she had no lectures. She enjoyed her free days at home with Jugus.

A blind brother

The priest who used to drive through the village quarreled with an elderly blind priest with whom he lived. He was the only sightless person in the whole village. They called him Fatha Alone.

Children were curious about the lonely blind man. One day they saw him from afar and waited among the pine trees in the vicinity.

“Do you know that he is totally blind and yet he walks around alone?” Fascinated children whispered blinking their eyes in the sun. The old man with his cane could sense them from a distance. One child asked him why he walked around alone and he answered that he was never alone because his Great Friend was always with him. They peered closely at him to see his Great Friend. They did not see anyone. They stepped back feeling scared.

This priest told them stories and looked up as if he could see full light. He spoke about the evil of greed and lust. He told them to be careful. The children thought he was a spirit already. They were stiff with fear. They ran away again. They hid behind trees and peeped.

Kabi was home feeding Jugus. No villager dared ask any question. Nobody even dared make fun of her. People continued to wash clothes in the river and to clean their souls in the church. After the clothes were dry, there was the long walk through narrow plots of land. People guarded their soil zealously. In the past people used land collectively. Progress then meant to be community. Now they began to call themselves Africans and to replace ‘Black People’ with ‘tribe’, *watu wetu* or our people. The circle of those allowed in became smaller. Killing their own brothers did not chill them. Mutilating and muting their sisters and daughters became revenge. They hang their parents to have a title deed. Some raped girls and old women because of land problems. They demanded ululations in congratulations for such great deeds. One young man was critical. He called his cubbie Harlem. He and his friends wore Black Panther pendants.

It was clear the people had lost the virginity of their land. It would be sold again and again like slaves into slavery. Years later, they read about the White Highlands in history books. Kabi and Wakabi knew that they were still called 'White Highlands', history inside Geography. People got title deeds to small pieces of land after independence. Most of their ancestral temple had become white man's land. It was gone. At General Elections the gracious Mama promised more title deeds. Sometimes they never came. The people said their curse was to live on small plots. They also understood that the city was owned by its makers and that the Maasai had retreated to the dry savannah and some forested enclaves.

To the people of the ridges, the coffee farms they went to work in were actually factories. Their toil in them scraping the soil, and begging it to sustain their lives, stole the beauty of their land from their eyes forever. Kabi's father had told her that her grandfather owned all that land that lay between what became the town and their ever- diminishing piece of land. It was taken by the colonialist, her grandfather's land, and shared out while his son was in detention. The land on which her paternal grandparents and all the people born into their family, would have lived on, was taken. Many people thrown out of their own land came and settled on it.

One day Wa Ngai said to Kabi, "Your son should have had a piece of land from me, but I cannot create land!" He said. Wa Ngai kept saying that he saw poverty of lack march into their families. It was easier to drown in alcohol. Wooden houses were rotting. What were dreams? Rich men were revered traditionally because they owned and were to share wealth. The days when land was maintained as wild- *ithaka*- and not surveyed were long past. Traditional wisdom taught that the farts of rich people did not ever stink and that poverty has no roots. This seemed to apply no more. Children were surrounded by fury and deprivation from the start, breaking into homes became common. Jomo Kenyatta spoke about land often.

"Let us return to the land. *Mashambani. Naturudi mashambani, Harambee!*" He would shout. Politicians took more and more land.

He owned large tracts too. His family and friends became very rich. The people tried to go and till their land, but with every turning of red soil anger fumed.

When Kenyatta's motorcade passed by them, they sunk into the hedges and felt the pinch of the wild bushes. After he had passed by everyone shook off the dust. Words came out continuously about how powerful he was. Young men said their fathers fought for freedom and not only for independence, and now they were ready to fight for freedom again. They were not afraid of death. Many people moved to the Rift Valley to lands far beyond their own. They saw Jomo Kenyatta passing by often. They sank into the stunted acacia trees. No one dared move. He would not turn back if one crossed the road. It was you the daring one that would return to dust fast. The people hang their spirits on the thorny ways. They too began to repeat: "Let us return to the land. *Mashambani. Naturudi mashambani, Harambee!*"

Another Saturday

“Kabi! Kabi! Wake-up, Mami is calling you!” shouted Wam from the kitchen. Wam looked into the room where she had dressed quietly earlier so as not to wake Kabi up. She immediately knew that it was the wrong time to call poor Kabi. The happy baby had tugged at her breast as usual almost all night long. Here she was now sorting out homemade pads. It was, after all, another Saturday morning. Was life not a ritual?

“Give her time,” Wam said to Wakabi who was preparing tea. Saturday was not a day of rest in Uberi. In Kaimosi, it was for many. Those in Seventh Day Adventists drank no alcohol there. Wa Ngai, Kabi thought, should have shifted there. But some things can only be internalized. And was it true that there was no alcohol in Kaimosi? A drinker like a river finds a way. Saturday. It was the hardest day of the week here. There were plenty of dirty clothes but they were the same clothes that needed to be washed again. Extra water had to be fetched so that one would not have to go to the river on Sunday.

Saturday was also the day on which the land was recreated. A new custom had started. On Saturday, groups of women and men, young and old, woke up to a long laid plan of getting rid of all weeds on one family's piece of land. They would all gather to attack the weeds that threatened to choke all the land. This was a singular intervention. They used their hoes and *rubiiũ* or small machetes and songs on their lips; the hoes for the men and the *rubiiũ* for the women.

The soil, which they turned over and over in different ways looked neat and smelt fresh. Eyes felt at ease seeing the clear land. After the hard work, a feast of *mũkimo* and *uji* was most welcome and in between the bites, many jokes. Song drove work.

Ndarĩire gĩthungũthũ
Gĩtina inĩ kĩa irigũ
Machoya butubutu
Nokĩo ngũbutabuta
Johnny ciakwa!

Kabi would not have wanted to sing this song. She understood what she heard and was never sure of the context but it spread. She wondered if people really sang to or of Johnnies? She knew that Banana Hill was named so by the British Colonial soldiers. They named it when it was part of yet to be divided land because when they looked down all they could see were bananas. Kabi sang because of the rhythm not the meaning for the crowd loved the tune.

I ate a bitter part, the song went, at the bottom of the banana, the leaves just made rustling sound, and that is why I clap my wings, Oh my Johnnies!

She knew that the song rhymed well but she would never call on British soldiers even as a joke. Many women would not. Johnnies stayed and still served in Kenya as part of British protection. As for bananas what could she do? They would never stop growing or being of use. Sometimes, she thought, one bends for some time instead of standing in the way of a strong river current, so that it passes and the person can breathe.

After the tilling of the land, the village would wait for the rains. After rain fell, they planted beans and maize. The leaves of both would fight their silent battle of pushing out through the soil to be kissed first by the dew then by sun rays. When they pushed up, the soil became little bumps rising and cracking in the middle.

How clean was the young green funnel of a maize leaf sprouting from the red earth! The green beans were especially beautiful in their style of growing. When she saw a field full of newly sprouted bean leaves, Kabi imagined that they went through stages of growth together as an army would through training exercises. They knew

they had to make many women, children and men strong when they landed in their stomachs.

All of them would at one time have a leaf already free in the air and the other still slightly twirled into the land elegantly turning itself up to greet the rising sun. They were like women throwing a winnowing tray up to catch clean grains with the dirt blown away by the wind. When Kabi used this tray like this, she wriggled her waist a little to enjoy the fresh air and work. On the land as beans grow, a few grains of soil might stick on the leaves after the rain but they were always neatly shed off. Then two equal leaves, one to the west and another to the east would be almost parallel to the ground. And the plant would rise up to the North while pushing its roots to the South and in all directions. That is how they came out, all equal and neat.

Only that for them, unlike the army, this was no fatigue or practice, they either survived or withered away dying. Their enemies, weeds, appeared like guerrilla fighters here and there and in all shapes and forms until the women came each with their *rubũũ* and removed them; bringing back peace to the searching eye.

The crops had been planted. They grew strong, the weeds would be each time weaker and smaller and the women knew the secret of the returning weeds; the weeds persistence would be matched by the women. They had to mark an enemy like this carefully. In the evening, moisture fell from the skies. Growing maize, beans, wild flowers, all plants and trees would be wet at sunrise. Work would start again.

The women did not have much of an option, for they had to feed hungry mouths and they loved peace. They would take their *rubũũ* as if caressing the earth on bended knees, every bit of soil went through their fingers. In the process, they strangled the weeds. It was as if they begged each grain not to betray them in this battle of weeds against crops. It was mainly the hands of women that each year turned the soil, and nursed it, begging it to give birth to yet another crop of maize and beans. They tilled the land over again, removing

the weeds and not hurting the tender shoots that held clean dew in them and kept growing higher each time.

The weeds would always rise to grow again three days after the women's labor; the weeds too got some dew, but the women shook it off. Theirs was a lost cause as they remained under the vigilant watch of women's eyes. They would be weeded off again before the harvest. The battle had been won. The women weeded not once, but many times before each harvest brought peace on earth, marrying seed to soil without violence. The women won this battle of life against death providing food.

Sometimes the difference between life and death was one meal in the hands of women who shared it, instead of eating alone. Women here knew and kept that in mind in times of plenty and of scarcity.

These women told stories about past famines as they worked. The songs that poured from their hearts kept them from giving up. They lived also to tell the tale of good harvests. Many lived long and happy lives. But at the end of life they cried loudest, for the men and boys you see, inherited the land and all political power.

Women, where did they belong? Even their burial places were uncertain and determined by decisions made by men after their deaths. Marriage defined women, not the men. If she was not married, it is as if she was not born. Men and boys had never, in that part of the world, bent to use the small machete, *rubũũ* to cultivate the land, their implement was the hoe so distant from feeling. They knew how to escape hard times. They rested on the roads chatting for many hours. They the owners of the land.

Theirs was the land that they still called *ithaka*, wilderness, as if they had not yet come to terms with the women's delicate work of taming the land peacefully and yet firmly. Men hit the land with hoes as they worked it so that it could yield the next harvest. Men knew their place in life and in death, they knew their houses- their Housewomen had to fight to make their space and the night - bird knew that better than all the earth.

On such days of group work, anyone left at home felt unhappy for not being in the communion of work with the rest. It was too much to miss out on the sweet talk and songs of work. The laughter that moved like a dance among the working people was special. Wakabi worked quietly but without stopping. She was well known for her incredible stamina. After the labour the main group went home in one direction, and she alone in the other. The night - bird sang that early afternoon. “*Kvĩ beboĩ, kvĩ bebo, ngũkomakũ?*” It made her feel the warm nest that she feathered in her chest. She remembered Kabi’s eager questions.

Kabi walked alone from the river without fear. Most people remained in awe of her and her power. No man dared ask her any questions. Women told her they wanted to learn everything from her. She told them immediately after school she would teach them much, including all the self- defense tricks she was still practicing every week.

When Kabi reached home, she found Sista Mirella and Sista Marietta. Wam was entertaining them. The two nuns liked to take walks to the village together because they wanted to chat in their mother tongue. These two felt just like the students in school who were forbidden to speak in their mother tongue and were punished when they asked if mother tongue was inferior. The other nuns were Irish. Sister Aoife always told the Italians, “You will learn English by degrees!” Sister Aoife was only truly happy on the 17th of March each year. Her white veil would be decked in green leaves. One year on such a day her name was changed to Eve. It was her feastday. Sister Eva she became.

“You must be tired, Kabi,” said Sista Mirella.

“Oh! Did you wash all those clothes?” asked the shy Sista Marietta. “*Poverina, poverina ragazza*, poor, poor girl,” echoed Mirella.

“Oh no, I enjoyed it,” said Kabi, “but yes, I am famished! I am so hungry I could eat three fat arrowroots!” The sisters laughed remembering how hard it was for them to swallow even one bite of *ndũma*, which they, however, ate whenever it was put before them on

their visits to ‘the locals’ as they called people like Wa Ngai and his family.

“Thank you for *inndumaa*,” Said Sista Mirella

Kabi stifled her laughter. Wam giggled a little. Sista Mirella was offered a cup of tea before she choked on the tuber. Sista Marietta’s eyes were almost popping out as she swallowed her portion. They ate the arrowroots quite certain that they were not swallowing it as easily macaroni. That was supposed to be their sacrifice. It helped their humility to eat local food, the Superior often said. Kabi explained to the nuns how she had learnt to use the arrowroot leaves as a cup, “*Ma che bello ! how biutiful!*” the two nuns exclaimed in unison.

“Oh! Kabi,” said Wam. “You must look at the clothes, sweets, cards and the statuettes that Atia has sent us for Christmas!” Wam was excited. It was the first time that Atia was able to send them gifts through the convent address because he had a vacational job.

Giacomo had given strict instructions to his brother not to send money as he was doing a lot by helping Atia and he did not want to create the false idea that money flowed like a river in Europe. Besides the Wa Ngai family would get attacked in the night by more than ten men armed with machetes. It was not easy to overcome those who have arms. Still more dangers, Sista Mirella would never rest with so many children being offered to her to be assisted. Afrika, the nun thought.

Sista Mirella had chosen this family because the couple had a brilliant son who could help fight poverty and be a good role-model. Atia’s character was impeccable. They knew that his father could not be trusted as nobody knew if he would stop drinking or drink until he was buried in the trenches dug in Mau Mau days. Alcohol was strange these days. It was not like traditional wine.

Wam only calmed down after she had admired what the nuns called *bambino* and *madonna*. She was entranced. The madonna’s pose of holiness carried Wam away. The *bambino*’s lovely little chest and wide bottoms were so attractive. She dreamed they were real. She was

lost in the Christmas figurines and the thought of a fantastic, small and clean family. Holy.

That *kirisimasi* was full of color for the Wa Ngai family. They would never forget unwrapping each of their packets to find super gifts. Not even the taste of the white sweets that looked like candles would be forgotten. And the quantity of sweetness in the *turones* was intense on the tongue.

Wakabi thought one of the sweets looked like a miniature log of firewood before it was split. Why, the cutting of those sweets was a job that took as long as it did to chop some firewood! But that was the only *kirisimasi* they had gifts in their lives and the nuns did know that. Wam missed the nuns. A strange attraction to them tugged at her breast.

Wam, Kabi and Wa Ngai, who was newly employed by The Line Matchsticks Factory, made their way from Kĩa to Banana. He was enjoying a dry season from alcohol. The family was glad. Aris stayed home with the baby. She had lived in Limuru after Jugus was born. From Banana, they proceeded to Limuru. They went to see aunt Priscira Wa Rĩmuru. This aunt had suddenly found herself in plenty after getting married. Now she could have her own children and dry her tears for the child she brought up for some days before the Chief took him away. It was not a long time back but a vacuum sat in her heart. She felt him. She missed him. She wondered if he felt her, wherever he went so many days gone. Wa Ngai and his daughters also briefly visited the Center of dedicated women that Wam wanted to join. It was a religious center called Marirũ Pax Guild. The mission of the lay women was to change the world order through daily industrial and intellectual work. Marirũ means wonder. Pax, Peace. The women members were celibate in the wonder guild. They did more physical labor than the men who lived near them but behind strong walls. It was safe to be there. It was a happy family where nothing ever seemed to go wrong.

Aunt Priscira had the money they needed ready as her sister had sent her a letter pleading for help. It was paid in at the Marirũ Pax Guild Training Centre. Wam and Kabi had fun at aunty's tea farm. In the early afternoon, before they left they sat atop a hill and imagined a train snaking round the neat hills. Wam remembered the many children's songs she and Kabi and other children had sang over and over again upon pretending they could hear the sound of an oncoming fantasy train. They also sang for passing planes. That was a long time ago.

The lush green two feet high tea plants covered hills and valleys appeared to her like a huge and soft mat from a distance. Behind the tree where Kabi sat, she enjoyed thinking. The fine weather of

Limuru in this season reminded her of kindness. She felt as if someone had given her a gift of energy, an energy she could increment with her movement. She felt as if a part of her spirit was afloat beyond her heart and feeding her smooth skin and soul with freshness. It was wonderful the way the gentle breeze rubbed against her skin. But she also knew how freezing cold it could get here. On these highlands, the weather could be hostile in June and July. People suffered frostbite. They had no winter clothes.

But the hot January sun that scorched delicate plants back at Uberi was part of Kabi's bad memories now as she enjoyed a warm breeze in the fresh morning air. How good it was then that Limuru was shielded away from the destructive hot dry sun. The sunrays were extreme and seemed to burn the grass in Uberi and other parts of the country. Limuru was balanced. When one walked there, one felt supported by happy air on all sides. Movement was delightful. Extreme hot weather was common in some parts of Kenya, especially to the north, but Limuru basked in her green serenity. White Highlands. For many in Uberi, Limuru in those days was like another planet. Going there was like, to some, walking on the moon.

The local climate in the same district varied much. Every plant was a living green in Limuru. Kabi had not thought much of the name Limuru, until she read that it was originally *ilmuu*, a name in Maa, Gĩũkabi for her, meaning 'dung of the donkey'. This made her wonder. A corruption of *Nabrm ntare* became Aberdares, meaning the one which shaves sheep. She read about Nyahururu which was Aiwuwurwur. All those names were in Gĩũkabi. Then there was Nyandarũa the place named after a woman of that name, who died at the bottom of the mountain as she traded with the Ũkabi. Wam and Kabi told Wakabi all about their journey in the evening. Together with Wam they talked about local names and the history they carried.

Wam loved traveling. Only one thing about locomotives, they reminded her of fire. She hates fires. She loves tea. She did not like lighting a fire. She disliked matchsticks. They stood in many corners like soldiers in their house.

For Wam, fire meant pain. And it was not just the little burns she got from time to time as she took off the clay and tin pots from the fire that made her hurt. It was any fire. Danger for her was fire. Fire was the fear of her own life in the present and the future.

In the past when her mother told her about her firefly dream, Wam did not realize but her mind distanced itself from her mother's feelings almost forever. Wakabi only knew that their relationship was not so deep. It was normal. She knew that Wam disliked firewood and charcoal. She had an aversion for paraffin which was used to light the fire. Wam was lucky that Kabi liked cooking. She often found the fire lit and food cooked when she came from the river on Saturdays.

Kabi remembered a time when she had to get a pot of maize and beans cooked almost by her breath more than by the fire. Even after laying the wood on cross-poles made above the fireplace so that the wood would dry for cooking, it turned out that the eucalyptus wood, *mibaũ*, had only dried on the outside and was wet in the core. She put the wood close to the fire but the wood would not dry. She blew and blew into the fire but nothing changed. The wood remained damp. This was long ago.

Tears streamed down her eyes. Wam tried to help her. Kabi felt so frustrated blowing into the fire that she wanted to scream. Her heart felt compressed. After great efforts fanning the fire, the wood lit up, but was consumed so fast that the girls could not keep a steady fire going. For a while, the food seemed stuck in the same stage after much firing. Raw. They knew it would never cook. *Gũthata*, they said of the food. This was the same word used for infertility.

Kabi continued blowing furiously into the wet wood. There were times past when she used an old bent piece of iron sheet to do the job but now she only trusted her lips. She finally made the meal. The hearth new Kabi had cooked with her breath and her heart. To fan the fire, she had been getting on her knees and turning her head to the side to blow her breath into the place that could start a flame. She had made food edible by using her entire body on her knees. In other

villages far from Kabi's people used a pipe or fan to blow into the fire directly. They blew from their lips. They reached the embers more accurately and were not on their knees.

Kabi's hair, covered with a scarf smelled of smoke and her hairline was covered with soft gray ashen dust. That day, in the evening, she found a long pipe that she could use to fan the fire seated. That was untraditional in their house but she stuck to it as if to a jewel. Just as well such food would be preserved in salt for the next three days and there would be no more cooking, in those days; she could rest.

That was not the only memorable meal she had cooked. She remembered using wood that was too light and dry. There was no alternative fuel for cooking but that very light and dry wood that burned up in haste and did not as much as warm up the food before it died down. The wood was of a castor oil tree. It was not meant for cooking. It was hollow in the middle. Her mother was away. She needed to write a paper and college exams were close. Her heart was heavy. Her baby was always crying and she cried gently too into her own chest. This baby was her nation. How would it survive?

The school work had to wait until morning. When she awoke, her eyes were big and swollen. She could hardly read. However, by seven o'clock in the morning, sixteen extra pages of poetry in English were filed away.

For all those fiery trials, this was a remarkable change of mood in the morning. Perhaps it was only because soon Kabi would be on a moving vehicle. She used to say that sitting in a bus that did not over speed helped her create her own world. She loved this and she called it the world of written possibilities. She said it increased her happiness, a condition stamped deep in her heart.

The class graduation party was due. Atia was now back and living in Nairobi with his young family. Kabi swam in a happiness beyond the bliss of reading, husband and children. She sensed this was connected to the song of the bird. This delight flew in her heart with happy wings. It came to the surface, to her skin like a good oil. She imagined it was the same as the way a growing tree, silently and unseen makes future seedlings for the survival of the species. She heard the bird: *Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?* Oh it's so cold, Oh, it's so cold, where shall I sleep?

Kabi never stopped to imagine her future. She could get far beyond what was of immediate concern in her thoughts. Her dreams were not empty. Sometimes people are surprised by how one moment can change a life. Not Kabi. She knew that in her blood.

Kabi was exuberant. Her life was blooming. It was as if her hands were open to receive plenty. She had given a lot. She was ready for the big Graduation party students had organized. She had asked her brother to get them a venue and some food. And so it was done. She had been a lonely girl at the University. She kept to herself. She was always busy travelling back and forth. Atia was meeting her in a group from the University for the first time. All they had in common was the achievements of certificates. Kabi was surprised to hear that many people were attending the party. They were coming from several colleges.

Pilot Will Sizwe had three days in the city of Roma before his flight back. He wandered on the eternal streets. At the famous Piazza di Spagna he looked at Christmas decorations. He walked from there to St. Peter's Square. He stood staring at the Pieta for a long time. In a bookshop under the huge columns of stone he saw on his right he could not resist buying a tiny image of the Pieta. He knew it was not for himself. He carried it wrapped and felt happy.

He wept in his soul. The story of his early life, etched on his memory was live again. Deep in his soul he knew he owed one woman his life. But he had only a vague memory of her. Sometimes the image was on its way into changing into a concrete figure and then it would vanish just before he could hug her. He would be left squinting in the sun if it was daytime or looking up at the moon if it was night. For when he was young he was taken away from her warm hands and loving heart by a tall figure. He found himself at school in Tarehe School in Nairobi. He could never trace her. But he could feel his longing for her inside him. He bought the gift for she who saved his life.

He remembered. That morning he had woken up early. An only child, he was in the house, when his father lit up a cigarette in bed. His mother seemed to be still sleeping. The gas explosion that was heard all over the village set the house on fire at once. Someone caught the giddy boy at the entrance of the house. A woman rushed him to hospital. She looked after him until he was discharged. His parents had recently moved into the house and nobody knew them well. It was illegal to keep him but the woman who saved little Sizwe felt he needed her comfort. They hid Will Sizwe and secretly called him the child of tragedy.

Will is back from Rome. He walks around the big school compound as he waits. He has arrived early for the Graduation Day party in Nairobi. There are many students already at the venue. Many more were still on their way coming. Atia who invited him has not yet come.

More students arrive in minibuses decorated with banana leaves and other branches. There are young girls, older looking women, children, grandfathers and mothers. The party is to be held here inside a school hall at the Red Nandi Flame Boy's School, off Waiyaki Way. The school is vacant and pupils on vacation.

On Will's mind was the first flight he had ever made to Roma. He swiftly walks on his own enjoying the afternoon fresh air. He stops now and then to look at a hibiscus, a rose, a bougainvillea. A

beautiful Nairobi Afrikan butterfly perches daintily on what he calls a Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow bush. He stares at the lilac, purple and white flowers of Jacaranda in September which he always remembers on his travels. Will always enjoyed the wonders of nature even more at home after travelling so far away.

He walks on fast again. Suddenly he slows down his space and stops. He hears a bird singing from somewhere deep in the garden. He cocks his ear and smiles. Then that vague face of a woman that always came to him in his sleep is back. He listens. She tells him as she always did that nature sings something. His throat is blocked with emotion. He wants to hold onto those feelings strongly, but they seem to slip down somewhere. He wants to grasp fully and understand for whom his ethereal longing is, but how can he with such a deep memory of loss and gain on one traumatic day? The clear image of his parents as protectors and as his beloved was roasted in a fire when he was small. It was only a month ago that he and Atia had met in a club. They were still making friends. Will was down to earth, he had decided to come to the party and enjoy the afternoon with Atia.

Will lived in a place the people called Moshambiki near Banana Hill on the way to Limuru. People also called him Moshambiki when he was small. They did not bother him with explaining where his parents came from. They loved him.

He loved to read Afrikan stories of origin. He read the isiZulu telling about uNkulunkulu: the parent of all people. The one high above and who created everything and looked after it. He watched documentary films often, he said, just to relax. He had seen one on the origin of life according to the Buganda. Will was deep and meditative when he reflected on the story of the love Nambi had for Kintu. Ggulu, the Creator has a daughter called Nambi who falls in love with a lone herdsman Kintu. The first man on earth. She was so persuasive Nambi was, she moved an unwilling God to accept Kintu. And the brothers in the family become the evil ones who are against Nambi.

When Will met Atia he felt something special about this brother from home. He did not wonder why he felt so at peace with him. The bond of brotherhood clicked like two magnetic clips to a buckle. People often repeated the proverb “blood is thicker than water” only when someone died. They did not realize that blood also found blood alive, and that this was at work when someone was found. They did not know that they both loved and missed the same food and drinks from home. The same motherly aunt. The party started.

Adau’s sharp eye did not miss how the dainty elegant Will delicately rested his eyes on Kabi. His look was intent and attractive. They were all seated. Everyone was eating. Wakabi and Wa Ngai sat together. Wakabi was happy. She laughed. Tears of joy fell almost down to the tip of her nose, before she could wipe them. Tears of joy. Kabi kept going to and from her parents. The camera clicked often. In her beaming smile, her pride in her parents glowed. Wa Ngai ate well but was impatient to go back home and drink. Alcohol was not served.

The music played exquisitely. Kabi’s beautiful dress fitted her thin waist well. She held the dress with a shining one buckle belt. She looked like the soft sun of the morning, before it crosses the sky. Like a bride. She was graceful and her skirt evenly spread out. Will laid his palm on hers gently and they among the crowd danced away peacefully. They danced until moonrise. Kabi was without doubt, the most elegant girl in the hall. She had a gentle look. She was shapely and graceful. Her medium heeled pumps suited her so well she looked as if she was a dancer on film.

Kime who was also graduating looked at Kabi and Will with deep jealousy. He and his friend went into a corner. They were whispering to one another.

“You see, Kabi refused to be with us in campus. I have tried her so many times. And now look. Just like our girls. Just because the man has parked a Merc outside!”

“No”, his Freddie answered. “She is better than that. She is always busy with study. Every time I wanted to talk to her she left the class in a hurry, I know.”

“She commuted to College. That sweet boy in a suit over there is her son. She did not live in the halls like all the other girls did. It was hard for her, man. She was the only non-resident at campus!”

“That man loves her,” Said Kime, “Look!”

“Oh, yes. I will ask her for a dance, that is what a man does. She will be posted to the Rift Valley. I saw the country plan,” Said Freddie.

Kime was furious. He swung in the graduation gown that he had not taken off for days. For a week he had walked up down the streets of Nairobi wearing it even to the barber’s shop. He jumped around jealously trying to see how to trip Kabi but he did not make it. The party went on peacefully. When it was over, Kabi and Will, Adau and Atia and their son Agudi, who was almost the same age as Jugus, left for Atia’s house to have a drink.

The house was not far. Jugus and Agudi played together. Atia and Will spoke in Italian and laughed at some words. Sista Mirella used to say ‘Reconyais’ for the word ‘recognize’. They found it funny. The way the British behaved in Afrika when they heard Afrikan sounds had suggested to them that nobody spoke a consonant- vowel, consonant -vowel language in Europe. Some people in the village had gone Americanizing their lives. Others were speaking ‘block nose’ English to one another. They praised one girl for how well she could speak through her nose.

They played some old music. The volume was high: *Sherehe kubwa sana, nitaifanya siku binafsi majibu mazuri nikipata. Kama nitakapo kubaliwa...* “Mbaraka Mwinyi blared. Atia told how he once danced to *Tina Tina* with an imaginary partner on stage in Italy and the people loved it. Kabi listened intently.

For several months after that Will and Kabi met. Will had flown to so many parts of Afrika and in great difficulty sometimes. He had escaped dangerous moments in almost magical ways as he learned how to fly aeroplanes. Birds were dangerous on high to a plane but

they were his favorite creatures in the whole of creation. He and Kabi talked for long about birds.

Their bond was fast and tight. Kabi shared with him the story of the bird that kissed her twice. It was the bird that told her to take action against Timo another time, one day at the river. This bird that never failed her, the bird that she loved. The two looked at each other as if they lived in a magical land. As if they had never seen anybody else in their lives.

In the open park the green grass was warm in the rays of the mid-morning sun. Some branches in the park turned in the wind, and made some sounds of expanding, splintering and throwing out seeds, growing. Kabi could almost feel the expansion in her. Crack! A pod flew open into the air. Will stroked the top of the palm of her hand gently. She looked at him. There was deep trust in his eyes. Kabi was at peace. The open wind blew and they felt completely happy alone and yet so together. Life that afternoon was kind and gentle. The air massaged her tired mind and skin into a freshness she had never imagined possible. It was even better than Limuru's cool air. Kabi was a great woman. Will a great man.

He laughed happily and gently. His dark skin glowed. Kabi smiled. He told her long stories about other cities. He had been from Mogadishu to Timbuktu. His knowledge and love for Afrika seemed endless. He knew so much about Mozambique.

He had flown to Quelimane one time and tried to find his ancestors there. The place he heard was apparently named after the verb *kulimani* for the visitor- perhaps Vasco Da Gama- had asked what the place was called and they thought he asked what they were doing. '*Kulimani*', they answered. Which means, cultivating. Will knew the same word in Kiswahili and other languages. He realized that his ancestors were everywhere in Afrika. He loved Otjiwarongo in Namibia.

"It is fine with me. I love mythical knowledge. You know about Olapa the moon goddess of the Maasai? She married Ngai. Enkai.

There was a fight between them. Seen the hole in the moon from down here on earth?”

“I didn’t know about Olapa! Did a moon goddess actually marry and fight with Ngai until the moon caved in?”

Will talked about Olapa. He now had roots with Kabi. He loved his life as it was. Only that he knew of his dissatisfaction, that he had with him a gift for someone, a woman whom he did not know. A soul- friend who visited him in his dreams. He told Kabi about that.

Kabi too told her story. He was happy that she was not circumcised. When she began to speak it was about Jugus. About Timo. Kabi and Will took a long journey to a past that was always present. Will’s mind was transported back to that evening in the banana bushes. He held her hand as she spoke.

She bravely went on to the birth of Jugus in the school bathroom. He wept with her on the cold floor of the school that early morning. They were quiet for some time. Will said where and how one is born did not mean doom.

Then Will contemplated Kabi more tenderly as if he had seen some shining pearls in her eyes. This tall and fine man was so gentle, Kabi’s heart felt warmer, there was no room for fear. She too stroked his hand gently. Together they hummed and hummed until their hum disappeared into one song: “*Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?*” Will sat up fast. He took a deep breath. He was tranquil. He concentrated more than he did at take-off. He looked up at Olapa, the moon goddess as known by the Maasai. She was visible in the day- time, at this hour. He turned his gaze slowly to Kabi. He had his eyes fixed on hers.

“Kabi, will you marry me?” asked a trembling Will. Kabi did not hesitate.

“Will, I will!” She answered. He saw the light in her eyes. His landing was safe.

He said to her in great effusion of souls,” Kabi, my Olapa, goddess of the moon of the Maasai, you and I are truly!” They both sighed.

Will recognized Kabi. Kabi recognized Will. They were one before they were officially married. They were fully bonded by the magical stories and the song of the bird. Will loved the bird's song. He could hear that inner song constantly in Kabi. They were related by nature in ways they could never have imagined before they met.

Kabi's thin fingers looked so beautiful when he took them into his hand. He told her how marvelous she was many times. Kabi could hardly speak. The bird did come down to kiss her forehead again. Will did not see it. She did not go into a reverie, she was already in one.

A week after, aunt Priscira welcomed them in. She was delighted to hear the good news. Will looked at her fixedly. He at once went back to his car and brought out the little wrapped gift and gave it to her.

"This is for you from Roma. I have been keeping it for you." It did not make sense to aunt Priscira or to Kabi. No one asked any questions. Will felt a deep satisfaction filled with a fascination shared fully with Kabi. They drove in a solid calm almost all the way back. Will was certain that Priscira was the one who held him tight that night he left the hospital and that Atia was the small boy who used to draw him on many papers and show him saying 'look, you are better!' Kabi was in silent beauty enthralled.

That night, she imagined her Afrikan style wedding. She did not know which of the many Afrikan styles of dress she would choose; West Afrikan? South Afrikan? Which type in West Afrika among the many existing ones? A Maasai one? Her own village style, was it Afrikan enough? What was it? Would she opt for Ethiopian or Rwandese wedding clothes? What is Tanzanian style? They were free to choose, but knew that it had to be something Afrikan. Is a Kaunda suit Afrikan she wondered? Chinese? Was it genuine? What was? What would her husband wear? She could imagine him in a fascinating jacket beaded in Maasai style.

Elsewhere life had changed too. Wam stared at photos taken at Kabi's graduation and at the park in town with Will. Suddenly, Wam

was more aware than ever of Kabi's incredible beauty. Kabi stood like a sculpture in Wam's mind as in the photo. Fate cruelly parted them, she felt. Kabi was tall and elegant. Her dark chocolate complexion caught one's eye with its supple liveliness. She had no blemishes on her oval shaped face. Sure and serene features reached the peak of their beauty in her chestnut eyes with long dark eyelashes. She had a clean carved chin above which a thoughtful yet mischievous smile was set. That smile revealed white unevenly shaped strong teeth. It was impossible not to be attracted to her when she spoke.

Her shiny pitch-black hair lay in combed neat wisps falling behind her forehead. It gave her face a perfect frame of valor. Her beauty was in her voice so pure. She defied suffering. Kabi was beautiful in her strength of character. She gave Wam life when Wam looked at her, even in photos.

But Wam's life had changed too. Wam was not allowed to attend Kabi's wedding which followed Kabi's dream fast. Those were the orders of Marirũ Pax Guild. Aunt Priscira went to pick her up for the wedding but Wam told her of many rules. She had to comply. Wam was to be celibate, obedient and poor. As if she had ever been rich. She liked the clean linen in the Guild life. She would never have a chance of meeting Kabi's wonderful man. It was feared that he would marry Wam too. But how could that be? All the Guild Savors said that it had happened before. They pointed out a local politician who married sisters as an example to be feared. Not Will for that.

Will had come into Kabi's life on fast wings just like the night - bird. The three: Will, Kabi and the bird were inextricably united. Kabi and Will were intimately excited. They loved with that love that thrived within and past the past where the present reigned. They were bound in thoughts and in their fondness and love for Afrika that they shared so deep. And beyond that, the universe ringed them in with the great chorus of harmony in diversity.

Kabi loved authenticity. Afrikan fabrics. Her soul searched for it in values as well. Genuineness was for her part of happiness. When

her choice was made for a wedding dress, it was the Ethiopian hand woven *yemushira libse*.

‘Beautiful!’ Will had exclaimed.

‘I will be *musbrit*, your bride,’ Kabi whispered.

The cloth was a delicate hand-made fabric. It was made amidst fine songs rising from the hearts of men and women of Afrika and falling out of their mouths. It was song leaving their fine mouths and teeth, like incense to cover the dreams of a bride and a groom so alive in love.

Yemushira libse was embroidered with golden thread an expression of the wealth of Afrika. Golden threads were humanized by weaving hands for Kabi to love them. Golden threads. Hands weaving. Hands working. Threads that led her to many thoughts. Golden fabrics, the beauty of the spirit to conquer. Will and Kabi flourished in all this. Their Maasai intricate evening wear, with a fascinating neck ring full of color hang prepared for the day. The beads and fabrics held the power of love.

The convergence of the two lives refreshed all in its surprising ways. Will would talk of how hard it was to move Kabi’s heart, yet how once they reached one another, they unfolded and everything moved swiftly. They were like dancers who knew each step when music played even from the distance of an unknown song in a dream.

On her part, Kabi thought hard. She recalled how Atia and Adau, his wife had celebrated wedding anniversary parties in their wedding clothes for years before she met Will.

Kabi was posted to a school in Kitale, in the Rift Valley.

Will used to say that he or she that loves birds must learn to fly both in reality and in life. Kabi had her first train journey from Eldoret to Mombasa during August holidays. Jugus was running everywhere with delight. He loved the sea. Will played with him. Kabi watched and was filled with joy. Jugus would throw his head back and laugh as if he wanted the whole sun to fall into his mouth. The sea had its way with most people. She knew they would return often to the coast. She spoke Will’s mind when she told him she longed to

travel inland too. She longed to cross borders. Will promised a journey to Arusha. He enjoyed travelling by all means including by train.

All the Wa Ngai and Wakabi family prepared for the wedding of Kabi and Will on December 12th for many months. It was called the 12.12 Wedding. The entire village turned up. The party was in Nairobi.

Women sang all day at the ceremony. Kabi and Will sat on a high dais receiving gifts and smiling. Jugus sat with them. The rest of the family was all around behind Wakabi and Wa Ngai. Aris and Atia and Adau sat together. In the first row immediately after them sat the Cobbler smiling. His pushcart donkey brayed from somewhere in the distance.

At the wedding food was served to everyone. Women could have choice chicken. Instructions were clear. The food was to be served equally to all. Only some could have the cake, but all the young people could dance. There were many former University students at the wedding. Timo could hear the music and smell the food from his *kinbu*. He was very sick. Most people said he would not last a day longer. He was alone. His sister was at the wedding.

Will resumed his regular flights after his two- week wedding holiday. It was inconvenient to have to travel by train to Eldoret and then take a bus to Kitale, but he did it gladly. Kabi was promised a transfer to Nairobi. She was hesitant as she had bought a farm after her first year of work. Will had been sending part of his training allowance for a share in that. Atia encouraged her to invest more. Kabi just like Adau had a separate bank account. The family property was registered in both names.

Adau stayed with Kabi often. The couples visited one other often. Kabi's beautiful maternity clothes were tailored by Adau by hand. She made her marvelous things. Kabi was admired by all the other teachers. She enjoyed her pregnancy and when Joe was born, Wa Ngai and Wakabi made the long journey to visit them in Kitale. It was a marvelous time they had. They returned home feeling better.

When Sau was born Kabi and Will went down to Nairobi. They were like one family. Nobody felt pressed by the presence of the other.

Will was actively involved in farmers' projects in Kitale and Eldoret. He had projects too in Banana Hill where he still had his old house. The family used it during some holidays and soon Wakabi and Wa Ngai moved in there. Heko and Bidii worked for them. In time Will stopped flying. He wanted to farm and hear more birds sing in the mornings. He wanted to watch over his children growing. Maybe he would return to flying in later years. He and Kabi enjoyed days of togetherness that were long and sweet especially during the school holidays when Kabi was free too.

Years went fast and the children grew like all women repeated often. 'There is no stone on any child's head. You worry when they are little and suddenly they are out of your hands!' All the children were doing well in their schools. Atia and Adau celebrated their tenth anniversary with Kabi and Will. It was intense and intimate.

In the evening, Will and Kabi went for a walk to Ngong'. There they could hear their bird singing many times. Kabi did not have to be reminded of it. She always heard the bird in her. It was so even in her maternity hospital time. Soon they were back in Kitale. More harmony could not be prayed for. It seemed that everything was in fine tune.

Coffee laced with Poison

When Kabi received the devastating news she lost her mind. Deep sorrow swallowed her. She was gone from herself for days. She had disappeared where no bird could reach her. She searched within herself and did not know when or how she would return. She was disoriented. People visited her and spoke with her, but she was absent, not there.

How could the crest of success Will and Kabi were riding so suddenly thin out and the two be thrown to the rough rocks on the bare and cold coast of life? Will was dead. He did not die in a plane crash as Kabi always used to fear long ago. He did not die in Johannesburg killed by criminals who stalked him as many people would have thought. No, he died in Clubimeet in Eldoret where he had gone to meet a friend. The doctor simply wrote in his death certificate, "Poisoned. Death from intake of coffee laced with poison."

Atia, her mother and children tried all forms of consolation but they knew she needed time. They often repeated to her to accept her situation. This was not going to make sense. Inside herself, she fought herself. She tried to figure out how she would have defended Will with all her skills on that fateful day. Round the rim of a cup of coffee death hovered. Death entered into his mouth through a gentle gulp. From a cup of coffee how come death she would often question? There was no one to answer. Why? Why Will?

The widow, children and other relatives and friends swam in untold sorrow, deep grief. For Will the loving and responsible father was no more. He was humble, the people said. He always used to ask after us and our problems helping when he could, some kept repeating.

"He lived for us," an old man summed it up for everyone.

Atia stood by Kabi as she took the matter to court. There were many problems. The case had to be heard in Eldoret. Soon it was of

no use for the witnesses including a waiter died in days after the court case was filed.

Kabi began to see Will in many things. She felt he was hidden right inside every cell in her. She was peaceful. She had three children to look after. She had her teaching lessons. Sometimes she felt like she made it. She could try. She felt like a tower protected from all sides except the questions in her head. Still she was calm.

Other times it was clear that her heart would ache forever. Living and reasoning would always be a struggle. She did not know how she managed to take each step to the future. It was harder to walk now than when she carried burdens from the land. Hope. Hope, the bird said. Was that all there was to do in life? Why had the bird sang for her? A bitter pain filled her.

“My daughter,” Wakabi said, “You start was rough. May life be gentle with you now.” That was all she used to say to her. She repeated it often. Kabi endured years of sorrow. She taught intensely. She worked her farm. She heard the bird. She saw glowworms. Were the burdens she carried on her back long ago now returning in another form? Atia and Adau did not leave her alone. She went to Nairobi frequently with the children.

A call

Atia and his wife, were sitting on their love-couch holding hands as Kabi rushed to answer the doorbell.

“Come in!” She said lovingly to her nephew Agudi who had gone out for a friend’s birthday party. Agudi went to sleep. He was tired but happy after the party and he said he could not possibly eat anything as he had eaten and drank to his heart’s content.

Agudi, Sau and Ani had given their parents and aunt a beautiful treat for their anniversary. They knew that somehow their parents and Kabi were always happy together. They were at peace. Adau and Atia understood how Kabi loved Will. They were sure that she was going to live alone for years. It was clear she stood tall and firm as a widow. She wanted to relish her years with Will. Adau and Atia tried to make conversations that would help her not to escape but to see the other side of life.

“How does one thank God for all our children?” asked Adau.

“Let’s say, it is hardly possible. First, they are so healthy, and happy,” said Atia.

“Then they are brilliant!” said Kabi.

“If you took your children’s school reports and mixed them you could swap the names and still tell there is a Wakabi in the genes. The Wa Ngais: same talents, character, all of them smart!” Said Kabi. “We should have had more girls!”

“Stop, stop!” Said Adau. Adau had a deep feeling that there was something wrong with speaking out so candidly about one’s blessings. They had to be whispered like gently singing waves. It was something she seemed to carry from her past. She thought Will died because her brother, his children, nephews and wife praised their quiet and successful father often.

“Come on,” Atia caressed her saying, “If God didn’t mean us to say these things, then he would have created us speechless! In fact, it

is the opposite. When we talk of evil we get evil. When we talk of good we get goodness on our side.”

Adau did not argue about this. Atia’s words to her were always like a soothing balm. He kissed her on her forehead and she stroked his wrist. Peace was made in love. The three adults stepped outside for fresh air. They stood in the garden. Kabi looked up and then spoke.

“The stars were not only made for us to gaze at but also for us to tell of their wonders,” said Kabi.

At the moment she said that, strong rays of the moon silently shone through the clouds and bathed Kabi almost in slow motion for long. Gently and slowly the rays shone in circles around her eyes, closing them softly. Then they moved around her head as if she wore a halo. The rays made ways around her breasts, her belly, made a pot around her womb and sank just between her legs in awesome humility. When she opened her eyes everything shone silvery before the moon vanished silently to greet the stars. There was a long pause. The silence carried in it the music of the soul. They all knew what they had seen.

“I know,” said Adau. “About the stars and beauty. We sat outside a friend’s house in the Rift Valley and did just that. Watched stars. Then our friends sang Maasai poetry to us. And how lavish and beautiful is the poetry of home.”

“I heard Maasai women singing to the trees of Loita and I nearly wept. In the music, what intonation! What love for nature!”

“Do they sing about trees to the cattle?” Kabi asked.

“About everything to everything. I remember songs to hidden trees unsighted by mortal eyes in a holy shrine where Morans hid for their manhood ceremonies for many months. I remember too, another about Aro the bull of great horns and brown color. The song described the old precious bull, with a white star on its forehead. It was never to be killed, that bull. When it died, its owner, the old man would use its hide for a bed to keep in touch with its spirit. Sleep on it until he died,” said Atia.

“And his poor wife?” asked Adau.

“All of these are very powerful symbols of, of... masculinity!” said Kabi.

“Yes, but you know, the bull reminds me of you, dear Kabi,” said Atia. “You are so strong and nobody can take that away, from you!”

“But, when I think of the Maasai women, just like many others in our land. How can you enjoy with your body when, when a delicate part of it is stolen from you when you are so young? And then you married off? Ehm!” said Kabi. The deep long silence that followed was broken when a door creaked open and Jugus run in and hugged his mother.

“Do you remember in Jongolei? When we were in Sudan?” Asked Adau.

“Oh, yes, I do. Amazing art. Incredible performances. Elegant and gentle people. Who makes the wars?”

“Hmmm!” Said Adau.

That night Kabi took an imaginary a walk in their farm. The stars were singing. She stared hard and long at Wills grave. It would never stop being a stab on her heart. She was still confused. Years had passed and still she did not really know how to go on. She had to be strong again and patient... for the sake of the children. People talked of filling a gap but she could not understand that. It was a present absence, she told herself. Conflicting. Painful.

In the background, she could also see Naana’s grave. She remembered the poor bed and Naana. Her talk. Her worries that Kabi would never be married. Still on her imaginary walk, Kabi hugged a tree nearby. She begged God to continue showering his blessings on her children, her father, her mother, her sisters and brother, his wife and children. She heard the bird sing.

She reminded the bird that she needed a long life. She prayed for her father who wasted away, bed ridden with liver failure. Her parents who could boast of many grandchildren and success in the family, were supposed to be enjoying their life. But not so. In the villages and everywhere, it was said that Mr. Abused Alcohol (AA)

never forgot to hit back at his abuser often leaving behind a chain of miseries. Alcohol abuse not dead birds invited death. She heard the bird cry again. Morning broke. They were swiftly on their way.

“Goodbye,” said Kabi without betraying her strong desire to want to stay longer with Adau and Atia. Her brother shook her hand and Adau hugged her. The boys were playing with a ball outside. Soon the six children bade one another bye with a lot of teasing about girlfriends. Kabi and her family were back in Kitale, deep in the Rift Valley, in the evening. Tired from traveling, all fell asleep quickly. They already longed for their return to Nairobi. Jugus dreamt he was still there. Everyday they talked of the return until the day dawned.

Dreams have wings

It was end of school term again and time to travel back to Nairobi. Kabi was again happily on the train journey that her children loved so much. For a long time, she had not heard the night - bird sing. On the train, she was dreaming of how in the past, as little children, they sang and danced to passing trains in Limuru. And the planes? They sent planes to greet Atia.

In the dream, she saw herself and her companions gyrating their little bodies as they stood on an embankment, two and a half meters above the railway line. The train sped fast. They sang along with its rhythm:

Chuchu, chu, chu, chu, chu, chu
Tek a reta to Nairofii
Don't lie to mi
Tell dha train to tell the rain
Don't lose dha brain

Do teo my brlother in Rũraya
Don't oil me lies
To come back on the plane
Don't do me fire
to Nairobiiii
East, West where is our brotha
Nothi Sauthi, where did he go?
Chu, chu, chu, chu, chu chu chu, chu sh, shi, shiiii.
The train ends there, the laine fall here, I go to a plane.
Ndege wangu, ndege wangu, nenda usalimie Atia
Na umwambie miye ni Kabi!

The train sped on. The little girls and boys danced, whirling and turning on fields of green, green, beautiful grass. There was one sad

little girl who was not dancing. She was holding a broken pink doll in her hands. She held the doll's hand and its body dangled down. The doll's dress was torn on the side. So was the girl's. One of the doll's thighs had come out at the hip. The girl who held the doll was Wam, a little girl. Still in her sleep, Kabi saw a mask appear in the fence nearby. She felt cold with fear. There were strong hands aiming their arrows at the train. She stared at the dangerous arrows. She knew that they could fly any time. Kabi could hear own voice shouting:

"Ooh, hoosh, shh, don't shoot my son, you can't! Stop it!"

Change of scene was as fast as can only happen in dreams. Older strong men were throwing pieces of broken glass into the train. They were hurling metal bars that fell and made passengers scream. In the train children cried. Mothers wept. There was chaos everywhere. She yelled but not a sound left her lips. Then suddenly, a sound came out. The words, 'Someone stop this train!' came out hot from her chest but they froze close to her lips. It was as if she was in a mime.

The train, she thought, would be derailed by huge boulders thrown down by people with painted faces. Kabi was running to tell the driver to stop. Where, where, where are the emergency strings? She gasped. She would pull them if only she could find them. As in all bad dreams the speed was wrong. This time, everything happened too fast and illogically. She touched different gadgets around her but she could not find the right buttons. Nothing worked. Then suddenly in her hand she felt the familiar smoothness of a telephone receiver.

She was speaking to the one on whom all power was bestowed by a poor people and land. Yes, she was. She told the President that she had a simple message for him. She told him that Moigithi was derailed and was hurtling down into the Rift Valley with many children riding in it. She saw the president smile at her and wave his baton. She added no more. He told Kabi that she needed to go the big house at night. That she required a brain check -up. He said he was a good doctor. He helped those who did not know it was wrong to imagine a president's failure or death to understand that this was treason. A way to get hanged fast.

Kabi spoke no more. She was extremely tired. She could not walk. She was stuck between two carriages. She stopped dead between them. She stared at the wires that connected wagon to wagon on the floor of the train. She stood there in the middle all directions pulling her, now to the right, now to the left and right, north and south and she felt dizzy.

On the right side of the train was her family, her country bleeding. On her left and was her dead Will, bones in a dry land. The chains and wires that connect the train pull in and out. They make room for her to fall out. She could see the ground. Rough, angled and greasy stones covered it. She was shaken out of her sleep by her son Joe. He stood by her saying,

“Mum, it is fine. Don’t scream again Mum!”

She sighed and groaned very deeply. What relief her deep breathing seemed to say, but then what had she done to her son? She held his hand and realized too late that he would feel all her sweat. Joe felt her heart beat. It was hard and fast. Peace returned to her and she whispered to him to lie down again.

As Kabi closed her eyes, she thought how wonderful it would have been if the train took just a split second to get to Nairobi. She was not ready to go on for hours on end in the dead of night as the train ate minutes after seconds, seeming to swallow the darkness. She feared that the train was going to crash.

She had worked very hard. If the country offered promises to the hard working peoples then why were the cracks of destruction beginning to show everywhere? This question did not leave her mind. She wanted to understand where the first crack started.

She saw sparks everywhere in her mind. Then they too died out. It was sad that she could not watch the sky serenely from the basin of the Rift Valley. It was too cold to open any windows, and so dark. She thought of Wam lying comfortable in a Marirũ Pax Guild bed. Wam who had vanished out of family life as she kept saying she was happy in Marirũ. To be holy, she slept on a hard board. It was a rule too.

Kabi knew that much as she tried to comprehend situations such as the one she found herself in, there were intervals when she was so overwhelmed that she was beyond rescue. Such periods could last for long. She normally kept them to herself. Only her brother Atia knew something about this strong conflict in her.

On the one hand she was so present and on the other, so absent. Atia seemed to understand her without any need of words. He kept on proposing solutions to problems that he understood mainly through intuition. Kabi felt sharp swords cut her heart. She fell asleep again, feeling sad after the dream.

Kill your heart

Miss Wam, for that was her new title at Mariru sometimes spoke to Kabi on phone. She advised Kabi to kill her heart. It was not strange. Wam thought that Kabi could live with a dead heart. Wam had dried hers of feelings. It was as if she had put her heart up in the old raft of the abandoned kitchen to dry. Wam said that Kabi's heart would die with sorrow if she felt all these things and remained alive to the pain. Kabi's past was not like a dormant volcano. Wam's was. Perhaps one day Wam's heart would spew fire. Wam's heart was dead. Kabi's was immersed in unbearable pain. There was a big difference.

How do you keep a lid on the heart? For Kabi, heart was love. To love Will in herself, her children, her work and others. Kabi could not pretend to be dead or numb. How could she feel some things and not others? Could she kill parts of her brain and soul? It is true that her feelings were raw and painful now. The loss of Will bit into her heart afresh. She did not regret feeling. Wam did. Kabi's soul felt injured, crushed, marked with deep scratches. Wakabi and Wa Ngai, so old and tired, could not be her refuge even if they now lived in a fine house. She had to be theirs and to walk alone.

Kabi had known she would spend that night on the train between thoughtful wake and disturbed sleep. More sleep, more dreams. When she fell asleep, she dreamt of her mother gently calling her 'Kabiiii!' Then suddenly she could hear the night - bird sing. Its song was like the pleasant sound of falling rain.

In her bunk on the train, Kabi opened her eyes to find the train still rumbling on. She closed them quickly. They smarted. They hurt. She tightened her eyelids firmly. She felt slightly better when she let eyelid lie upon eyelid. Gently she opened her eyes again.

The light was on inside the compartment. Outside it was still dark. The old rhymes that she used to shout with her friends whenever a train passed came to her mind as she recalled her dream.

Soon, thoughts of the strenuous end-of-term work that she had finished in far less time than the deadline allocated so as to leave for holidays earlier took over. She had done everything remarkably well. The other teachers were impressed by her speed. Alone and awake now, she sank into herself and felt even more exhausted. Where else was there to go except into deep thought? Seven years of teaching were long. Seven years of partnership and marriage were nothing.

The Nairobi-bound train was traversing one of the coldest places in Kenya's Rift Valley. It was in Timboroa, 2 894 meters above sea level. It was frosty. It was chilly here any time of the year, even when most of the country was warmer. Nights remained extremely cold. The silence of the high region was solid and unperturbed. The night-bird was not to be heard.

Kabi walked out of the compartment. She saw the man Joe had talked about. Joe had told his mother that he saw a man who was dressed like a crook and passed by him fast. The man wore very dark glasses. Kabi stopped to peep through the window into the darkness outside and when she turned back she saw the black glasses first. Indeed the man sat in the corner of the open compartment next to theirs. Then Kabi noticed that he fidgeted continuously. He adjusted his glasses around his ears every second. His gestures were quite irritating but Kabi realized something just as Joe's 'crook' started fumbling and touching the walls to stand up. He felt his bag.

"Where would you like to go?" Kabi asked the blind man.

"My companions are in the Third Class. That is where I want to go in case they forget me," He answered. She kindly led him there. He had traveled separately because a parish elder, a man called Serem, had given him a Second Class ticket. The parish elder had remained hiding in the Burnt Forest Church. That was after helping a man whom people wanted to kill because he belonged to another ethnic group. Those who wanted to kill him assumed that he supported his own ethnic group in politics. It was not true. The man had no chance to explain himself. He believed in the secret ballot, he said, and not queuing behind a candidate of his choice. Serem and he

were punished for that. Serem was always crying with compassion. His eyes watered whenever he saw a person trying to hide their own identity to survive.

Joe's crook also began to cry as he quickly told his story. His face was strained. He would not let his tears go beyond the roots of his eyelashes.

"Serem put many other people on many trains to save them. Many have gone before me. Before I left, Serem went to every spot people had been killed and prayed to the God of his ancestors. He made sacrifices for forgiveness with other elders because it was a very strong curse that followed the killing of people especially women and children. Cursed are they who split the bellies of pregnant women open. Later he went round telling his people that he cursed them with other elders for provoking the wrath of the spirits upon a whole nation! Suddenly he said, "My daughter, do you think we shall overcome this?"

"Yes, we shall" She found herself saying, with tears in her eyes.

Kabi took him by the hand to the Third Class. He was a man conversing with life and death. She was not going to leave him helpless. Kabi was disturbed. She remembered that many on the train had been thrown out of their homes and forced to travel to the coast and to the lake regions. They were running away from ethnic cleansing in that Valley of the garden of life, where all humanity was said to have originated when paradise celebrated the earth. How many contradictions could a soul bear? The splendid place made the beautiful moon and the resplendent sun cry endless tears. The place where the night - bird sang no more for there were more bones and limbs decaying inside the basin of the Rift Valley. There were many skulls there.

Joe woke up when his mother returned to their compartment. He insisted on sleeping with the lights on. There was no convincing him to switch off the lights. The boy persisted and said that the stranger was not trustworthy. Maybe he was pretending to be blind, Joe explained.

“Mother of kindness, what if you had been taken away forever by a man acting blind? What if they poisoned your tea?” He asked.

“No, Joe. It is not always like that.”

Kabi understood Joe’s fear. Her son was sure that harm could come from anyone. The train rumbled on. Joe was fast asleep again.

Kabi wondered what had become of the chaotic situation that had been in the Third Class coaches in the early evening. She had seen pots, plates made of tin, blankets and mattresses and pieces of wood that looked as if they were parts of dismantled old furniture scattered everywhere; in the Third Class.

There were desperate efforts by the owners to reserve their places and make room for all these things and there was chaos. The tired people spoke in muted and husky voices. Not so the voices of the children that seem to be ever melodious even when in pain.

Would they have slept a wink? Kabi knew of total destruction. Entire families were waiting for the train. They were carrying it seemed, every little and big thing they owned. A place that had been named Burnt Forest had violence again and again before elections. Would Serem rename the place Amani?

It was clear that cracks became wider in the nation of the night - jar. The bird now only sang in the hearts of a few. The bird no longer dared sleep in many places. It left areas that were steeped in tension. Its song was receding more and more into the only deep and dark parts of the forests that were left. The places where only pure organisms could hear her sing. In Kabi’s mind, however, the song became louder. Sleep became a luxury.

Arrival

Kabi could hear again the terrible scream of the little boy who fell on the rails of the train. He was thrown down in the mad rush for boarding the train. He yelled hard. The boy was lucky the train did not move. Kabi had seen his mother's anxious face as his grandma helped bandage his foot with a rag. He had fallen on iron with two green bottles in his hand. Pieces of glass had been well pressed into his stomach flesh. The boy cried as they were pulled out before the rag bandage was wrapped completely to stop the bleeding.

Kabi recalled more faces she saw there. They seemed to zoom through her mind with the rhythm of the train. It was like a fast close up movie. Every face told a story. Hungry children, women and men, crying old and young; all were suffering beings in the family tree of a society she was part of. Rape of a nation again, the nightjar wept. The train sped on. They people felt cold, she thought, but they couldn't unfold their ragged and smelly mattresses for there was no room.

Of some of them she remembered only one thing. That on the train they looked like they were trying to convince themselves that indeed they were going somewhere, perhaps were on a freedom train. Their puckered eyebrows and staring eyes dared not move. Where would they go when the train stopped at the last railway station? When the engines finished playing their part in taking the people somewhere, then what would they do? Where had reason fled to during the nights of unending violence?

Then she saw again the image of the girl who struggled with sleep on the rude Third Class benches. Her neck was bent with sleep. Kabi saw her head slide onto the *shuka* covered chest of a man with a long neck. He wore swinging colored bead earrings. He began to sing gently. He protected a child, a child like his own. He turned her back against his chest. She folded her little arms together. His long beaded

ears swung with the rhythm of the train. The girl was transported to a world of dreams consoled by his guttural hum.

Looking at Joe yawn and fold his right arm across his chest touching his shoulder, Kabi saw a fleeting image of Will in her son. This little experience that Joe could not have been aware of, beckoned Kabi out of the deep cave in herself. It promised to keep her above the storm in her heart. She relished how Will became a father to Jugus too. Will had wanted so much that his youngest son was named Amani and Amani he was called as if by a prophetic father who knew what his children and the country would need most in their lives was *amani*, peace. For Kabi, Amani was a child of peace that is tested by injustice.

“Did you finally sleep Mum?” asked Joe

“Yes, I finally did,” answered Kabi taking down her last drop of tea from her flask.

“It was a short night!” Said Amani.

“I heard Joe and Mum speaking for long at night,” Said Jugus.

In Jugus and Amani too, Kabi could see Will in many little ways. It was as if he was coming back in all of them as they grew. She saw him in her trinity. It was in little gestures of her children that she caught glimpses of Will’s ways. She remembered when Jugus first put on Will’s big shoes and pulled his feet around the house.

The train was fast approaching Nairobi. Joe, Amani and Jugus were standing at the window counting scattered trees and shrubs. The train ground to a halt at the Kibera Station. They had one more to go to the Central Railway Station. Excitement rushed through the children’s veins. Kabi was also happy. The long journey was over.

Soon Kabi was back and busy with her children. They packed ready to travel from the train station.

“Mum! At last we are here!” An exhausted Jugus shouted with delight. The fifteen-hour rumble in an old train ended in a smooth taxi ride through Waiyaki Way and into Lavington Green.

Riiiiiiiiing! Went the gate bell. Ariani, the elderly but lovely assistant came to welcome them in. They boys loved her. They

hugged her. To them her sweetness was as that of all the grandmothers they knew put together. Rehema was as sweet.

They had kept the house sparkling clean. You could smell the purity of the air in there. The brown, red and green furniture was homely. It felt warm. Ariani did her duties really well even when her boss was away. She felt like the house was her own in a way. This was the reward that the family received for making her feel she belonged.

Atia, his wife and children had left the day before for a holiday in Mauritius. They knew Kabi and her children needed a break. Everyone knew how hard she worked as a teacher, farmer and mother of three.

Atia knew too that Kabi and her children had to enjoy their stay. He planned how to give her some days on her own. Kabi did not realize that she overworked. Wam and the others knew that intense work helped Kabi to deal with the ghost of loneliness that haunts all those who dare live; especially those who know the song of the night - bird. Only Will had known about Kabi's kissing and singing bird.

The two women Ariani and Rehema helped with gardening and housekeeping. They were a perfect match. With them near, the family and property was secure too. Many people from nearby villages held the two women in high regard. They were looked up to. They were respected here and at home far beyond the artificial salute and the frozen nod a government minister got. Their good hearts, their diligence and love had earned this respect.

Darkness and light

A beautiful day welcomed Jugus, Amani and Joe to Nairobi again. They went outdoors and played before their mother awoke. They were exhilarated.

After breakfast, they were cycling fast down Manyani Road. They swooped towards the lush green fenced gardens not remembering how hard it would be to ride back up the hills they almost flew over.

When Kabi awoke, she heard the energetic chirrup of weavers. From time to time, she could hear other birds' tunes as if in a big chorus cheering. Next door, a dog barked and a girl shouted, "Tommy sit! Sit Tommy, sit!" This was repeated several times till the dog sat, and continued wagging its tail with joy dragging it on the ground as if it were a broom over the clean brown earth spotted with short and gentle grass. The two houses were separated by a thick kei apple hedge.

Now and again Kabi could hear too the sounds of cars whizzing - by. The neighbor's young ones were in full action. One boy burst out singing only one line: "*Zaanenaaa, sikuunkuuu, kengeleeee....* bells of joy are saying something!" That is all Kabi heard as the singer ran across the compound leaving only a trail of the melody disappearing thinly behind him. It would soon be Krisimasi.

Kabi was strolling through the fresh flower garden. It was delightful. She wondered at the uniqueness of this place and felt its power liven her up. What really took up her mind was, she thought as she walked towards the gate, the variety and mixture of sounds that one could hear here. It was very unlike the silence on the farm in Kitale.

Cars, lorries and trucks driven past, birds singing and children playing. She could hear strong male voices and trills of women's voices as many continued to walk down Waiyaki Way towards, first Westlands shopping center, and then the city. The people streamed by like an unstoppable torrent of power. They walked to work early

to the Industrial Area factories, ran at times to the other end of the city.

In the early afternoon, she walked with the boys. This time things were quite different from the morning. The traffic was almost ceasing. From time to time, they saw someone walking. It was 3 O'clock, the still hour of the day in the city. The tired hour in the countryside. Then the road was free of traffic. A ray of silence seemed to cut through the afternoon, slicing it into two as the sun scurried across the bright sky.

Kabi had more time then to enjoy the surroundings. After they passed the well-built houses of the type that her brother lived in, she began to see paper and cloth structures. These were shacks in which many people lived; she at once remembered her parents' first mud house Uberi. Something she could not explain began to make her feel that she belonged here. She was relaxed and free. But deep inside she was surprised. She realized that a part of her that was still dead with pain was coming to life. She felt it sprout in her again. She knew that life began to grow in her like a yam vine creeper. She felt warm within her.

A flyover the poor road connected Lavington to the posh Loresho estate.

"Is this where the people who walk to work in the mornings live?" asked Jugus.

"Yes," answered Kabi. "Yet they are always clean and smartly dressed," She added.

As they walked on, they saw a huge lorry on the main road. On the footpath, beside the road, a young boy was pushing a wheelbarrow laden with napier grass. The grass lay on beige sand normally used for construction of concrete houses. Joe saw a little of that sand on the edges of the full wheelbarrow. He looked keenly at the boy and his 'lorry'.

"Hey, look at that barrow beside the lorry!" said Jugus. While they were taken aback by the difference in size between the two, Amani was staring at the young bare-footed boy who was wearing a

torn, loose khaki pair of shorts. His chest was bare. Amani was counting the boy's ribs. He felt what Kabi often spoke about, *tha*, hit his heart. Compassion. It was as if the fine strings, cords of the heart were moving and brushing one another inside there. It was not something Amani could explain. He felt it.

As the lorry passed by, the boy continued pushing his wheelbarrow and whistling. He stopped by a big trailer parked just along the road. It was as if he wanted to strengthen the palms of his hand for the task by rubbing them together fast in an upward movement. The trailer was marked '*Shaaarmacon*' above the windscreen.

Joe was wondering how many wheelbarrows full of sand it would take to fill the giant trailer. The boy in tatters continued pushing on without one look aside. He was sweating and sniffing. Soon he was out of sight. On top of the flyover, which was quite high, the boys and Kabi stopped to have an overview of the area. Kabi saw that the wooden structures sprawled all around Resho and the adjacent Kyu estate.

To the left of the flyover, the structures were officially known as Kenyalini but popularly called 'Michigan' like the American State and city. The old men and women called the area 'Mishigue'.

This is where Ariani was born and bred. She used to say that people who settled there belonged to a new generation. They were not the ones who had formerly worked on the white coffee farms. Some of those farms were now turned into housing estates for the rich. At every gate were two words: *Mbwa Kali*, Hostile Dog. The poor people now worked in houses of the wealthy. It was always the badly paid work that they got. Then, according to Googo, the granny who lived there, that land was owned by Rondi Drama, whom she sometimes called, Rodi nde Ramea. His was expansive land in Kenya. The children of the laborers of these farms ended up in the city industrial areas to look for work in factories. There they read: *Hakuna kazi*. No Jobs. *Mbwa Kali*. Hostile dog. The city seemed kinder, but there was less oxygen in there. The rich families inherited more and

more hunting ranges. There were many boards that read: *Trespassers will be prosecuted. Mbwa Kali. Hostile Dog.* The people read them one after the other almost all day long.

Some men and women were caned many times for passing near Rondi Drama's land. They were told that they passed there with an eye that showed they intended to covet and steal.

Sometimes some were shot dead by nobody knew who and buried quickly in shallow graves. When their relatives came to look for them they were told that the dead person had not been at work for many months. Then Rondi would be seen laughing when he saw notices about missing people or heard anyone was being looked for. He like the president had a whisk and a baton to swing around as he whistled.

Years on the children of the laborers would marry and try to settle. But they would be deprived of land. They had to fight to inherit jobs as gardeners, housemaids and cooks from their relatives.

Ariani and Rehema used to walk to work from Kenyalini Village every morning. Kabi and the boys walked fast as they listened to stories Ariani told them. Some of the stories were about people that she knew well. Others were about animals.

The people said that Rondi had inherited his grandfather's grave humor. His grandfather had a penchant for shooting black heels and legs as they run for refuge.

Each part of the slum area had a name. The names were taken from other countries and from other parts of Kenya. Among the zones that grew fastest were Kapthabethi and Vietinamu. They were named so by inhabitants who built their houses there in a hurry on the night they arrived from Kapsabet. They too had travelled by train. They had made it back in the dark seeking for light and fleeing from violence. They heard about Vietinamu on the radio.

The Fire Brigade

Ariani's stories about Kenyalini Village were always breathtaking. One day, one of those fires whose origin was never discovered broke out in Kenyalini Village. The press was there before the fire brigade. The latter arrived in trucks that had no water! They were there obeying the rules of Generali who ordered them to leave their department with haste.

Jugus told this story every time he met a new group of boys or made a new friend. "Punctuality and order without common sense are useless!" he would say and laugh. Jugus said that bad law was no law, adding that blind obedience was just mere comedy. Later, talking to his Mum he learned something more. The fire brigade had been ordered to leave for work without water. They had merely come to parade for the press. They were in full fire combat gear for a charade. It was about perfect public relations for those who complained that all was not well in the country.

It was a lesson for life for Jugus. But from that day on, the burnt part of the slum became Burnt Forest because of the stories that were told from house to house in the slums about how dangerous it was for certain people to live there.

Kenyalini Village was becoming more and more of a burnt forest with no water towers to give growth and put out the fire of death and drought caused by infernos of greed and hate. Animals in the nearby parks began to leave the areas they knew best in search of other pastures or simply to die. One rhino appeared in a home in Independent Jamhuri Estate home in Nairobi. It was tracking moisture along tap water lines. People began to fear a wild and hostile animal invasion.

When the rain fell it was angry. It took with it more lives of animals. The floods killed people. Ariani and Rehema were lucky. Atia built houses for them after they lost everything save their lives in the inferno. They loved Kenyalini Village. Ariani used to fondly tell

stories about people who had joined scores of others to settle down in Kenyalini Village.

The story of the man who limped on one long leg and whose eye was covered with gauze would fascinate the boys. He reminded Jugus of Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* and *Muthesha itu*, the man whose head pierced the clouds. Joe could see his head in the clouds in his mind's eye. There was also the story of Hata, the loner, and Kanyi the mad woman.

In the heart of Kenyalini Village, the Sisters of Mercy looked after a multi-purpose complex that offered basic services to the people. Here the poor could get free schooling, food and medical attention.

Kenyalini Village got more and more inhabitants every year. With every new comer to the slums, the slum's desolation grew deeper and deeper. Slums covered with pain have their own defiant spirit. They bathe in an indescribable defense of independence. They wear the breastplate of resistance. That is why life thrives there. Sometimes in Kenyalini, life like a climber grows fast on a single dramatic moment. At one time it was the dramatic arrest of a thief who stole a cockerel which suddenly flapped its wings and crowed: "Kookokorokow!" Its owner jumped for the neck of the thief.

"Give me back my cock," he said roaring. "Give it back!"

The duel was long and painful. In the end, the man handed back the cockerel with both hands. He submitted. He surrendered with arms up in the air and pulled his legs to start on a hungry journey home.

"You build your house of better materials for me; but it is yours, I build my own shacks using boxes and stirrings but this, is mine, it is my home," were lines Kabi read there on a small paper that hang on a wall. It was written by a young girl. She was not surprised. The enemies of the slums come to destroy what they see, but those who live there know that they have something of their own. Kabi was deeply perturbed about the attack on their dignity.

On every Sunday afternoon, the spirit of the slums was alive and almost tangible as most of the people were at home. It was the spirit of the struggle to live, not rest as people did on the other side of the road.

Evening

That evening, Jugus, Amani and Joe sat in different corners of the big living room, each occupied by their own work. Jugus was reading an anthology of Afrikan Short Stories. Joe was sketching the wheelbarrow and the boy they had seen. He was also working out figure patterns in Math. He drew many symmetrical patterns. Amani joined him working with figures and patterns. Amani went on to read once again the long letter their three cousins had written to them before they left for Mauritius. After that he read an article titled *I am Joy's heart*. It was about the human heart. He was so happy to read and learn about how the heart worked.

Kabi was toying with her pen as she looked over the balcony that gave way to a neat garden. She was thinking and writing *The Lord of the Slums*. It was a book describing the rich soul of the slum dweller in contrast with the poor souls of the richest who exploit the poor. She thought that this is what she was going to write about, but when her pen met paper, the story took a life of its own.

I see butterflies make their way past the tips of the blooming jacaranda tree. Their golden color contrasts with the lilac of the flowering tree. All around, there are beautiful flowers of every hue. There are bushes and grasses. One jacaranda tree wears a purple hat of soft blobs of lilac trumpets blowing to the skies. The tree is almost completely covered by bougainvillea making it even more brightly colored in a coat of red through which dark green leaves shoot here and there, as if just sprayed with a coat of watery green paint. It is as if the tree dressed in red dances a revolutionary dance. There are eucalyptuses, pines, and wattles scattered in a happy and easy asymmetry.

The wind blows lightly, spreading out tufts of white clouds across the sky, like umbrellas that shelter us from the heat of the sun. But how long can we take shelter under the clouds? It is cool, lovely and bright on this side where we live. All is well on this side of the city

where the money we count almost always ends in three zeros. My imagination is steeped in wonder.'

Jugus run to out to the balcony.

"Mum, how come Afrika is called the dark continent?" he asked, interrupting Kabi.

"Well, they called it dark because it was underdeveloped by their standards."

"But what does the word Afrika really mean Mum?" he persisted.

"People differ about the origin of many names. Afrika's is not exception but I believe it means the land. Cefereka, or Thefereka the Amazigh say in their language in the North of Afrika, Algeria. It is a continent of the wealth of the black people as it was named by...." She said as he interrupted her again.

"Who are the Amazigh?"

"They are a people whom the world called Berbers for a long time. Berber comes from barbarian, people who do strange things which are not good for humans. But these people know their name. They call themselves the "free people" Amazigh. We must try not to give people labels but let them just be and call themselves what they want. Your father used to be teased a lot by people who called him 'the tribe deprived', *mkosa kabila!* That was because his origin was in another country. It was unfair.

"Did those who call Afrika dark do that because perhaps they did not know how to get to into the interior?"

"No one knew how to go into the interior of any place or where that is anywhere until you go there. It was the same with every land. But you are right. However, the idea of light and darkness is strange."

"Since there are paths on the land, ways in the sky and on the sea, and one can come to Afrika easily, is Afrika still a dark continent? Is it not bathing in light?"

"Humans. We get to know things slowly. And we avoid the knowledge we have for other reasons. People know. I can bet you even in many years to come someone will still be saying Afrika is known as the dark continent!" Said Kabi.

"Mum, may I say something?" asked Jugus.

"Yes, of course!" answered Kabi.

"Well, the continent remains dark from their point of view because the darkness is in their minds. They are not the ones who determine who we are as a continent and who you are to the world!"

"True."

"Don't allow others to make you think of darkness as bad; because you will think Afrika's other name is poverty. I know poverty is the worst bomb and perhaps the worst disease."

"But?"

"But poverty is not only material lack. In the end some contrast dark skin and light."

"What is poverty?"

"The worst form of it is in lack of spirit. We are rich."

"What? What is the color of any soul or brain?" Jugus asked with a hard look on his face.

"You are deep, my son. We have said it for years, for too long, but I say it again. Black is beautiful. It ought to be the color claimed by all those who know what the joy of life is, be they white, yellow or black. Minds that see beyond some kinds of poverty."

"Whack! That is the meaning of that big word... Consc... ious ness?"

"Yes. You can be white and have black consciousness... Steve Biko said that. I heard him. Black is the color of those who want Kanyi the mad woman to stop talking to herself beyond her grave where she will rave with great fury!"

Kabi looked up. Her eyes were inside Jugus' eyes and his eyes in hers. Jugus looked at her lovingly and said, "Mum, can we go to the boy's outings that uncle Atia said he'd found out about?"

"Ah, when did he say that?"

"We have it marked on the kitchen calendar too."

"Let's see the diary," Kabi said. "I'd forgotten all about it!"

Jugus dashed to the corner of the sitting room, and grabbed it. His finger pointed at the date."

“Here!” he said breathlessly. Joe and Amani were in tow.

The boys’ excitement was palpable. The train journey had been interesting, their walks and cycling so exciting. The boys had ‘forgotten’ the camping plan until they met Omolo, their Nairobi friend and neighbor on their way back from Kenyalini. But they had not expected their Mother to forget that.

There had been much excitement when uncle Atia had spoken about camping saying that he was going to book them in. “And just in case your mother forgets,” he had said to Jugus all the way back in October, I will put it down in my home diary.”

Some of his old friends used to tease him calling him the world organizer.

Kabi recalled a detailed recommendation from her brother Atia, asking her to let Jugus, Amani and Joe join the other boys.

The Boys’ Club was going to WilliamH Camp. Some parents in the Red Nandi Flame School organized the camping holiday.

The boys would be safe in the company of some teachers and a good number of parents for a week. The most exciting sentence for the boys was in a note that Ariani handed them the next morning. It was from Atia. Jugus read it out loud.

“I’ve made a tentative booking for them, pending your confirmation. Please ring 483280 and speak to the secretary. She makes all the bookings and camping arrangements.”

“Yipeeee!”, “Yahuuuul!” the boys yelled. Just then, Ariani brought in a tray with their tea. Amani jumped up to help her.

Looking at Kabi, they all knew they were going. “We’ll meet the other boys, we’ll crack jokes and light camp fires,” said Joe, “and we’ll build bridges over the river Nanyuki and swim, and...”

Kabi smiled at the thought of the motherly care her elder brother gave her. She was happy. She sipped her tea. Peter peeped round the corner at the door. He still had the feeling of being in a new and strange place. His grandmother, Ariani had only been allowed to bring him to work after the Atias left for holiday.

“Come and have some milk,” Kabi said. Peter sauntered over shyly to her, touching her and taking off straight for the kitchen whose direction he knew well. He got on Ariani’s lap and leaned on her as he rubbed his left eye with his right hand. Ariani had taken a break and was sitting on her kitchen chair having a snack.

There was excitement over the packing as the boys neatly put all the things Ariani had prepared for them in two bags they shared. In a few minutes, all the boys were sleeping soundly after an exciting day.

That night Kabi read a part of Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography. In the dark distance, a nightjar sang. Its song was heard by the ear of her heart in which she stored its searching tune. The notes of this song in their millions piled into her ear and never filled it. She had read somewhere else that her bird in English sang: “Whip poor Will! Whip poor Will! Whip poor Will!” She still heard it say now. And then: *“Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ? Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?”*

Something stirred deeply in Kabi’s heart. Something beautiful tugged at her pure feelings. She had a dream full of colors. This first part of her dream was filled with the colors of the rising sun. An orange sun tinged with shining yellow, yet soft. She woke up and read again.

She embraced Gandhi with grace, beauty and commitment. She was not deluded about the task ahead. Life had forged her will into that of a strong woman. Her spirit said she wished to be alive forever. To create what could not be destroyed over the years, even after life as known by calendars had passed.

Why do you strike me?

At cockcrow in Kenyalini Village that morning, Weree Wa Weereh awoke to the familiar sounds. “Kokorokooow!” “Kokorokooow!” his own rooster crowed along with the others.

He did not turn and sleep again. Why turn where the bed is so hard and uneven? Why turn when there are no blankets but only rags to cover one’s body? It was time to leave the rags and set the fleas hopping. His wife was trying to light the fire but the wood she was using was damp.

It had rained and the water had seeped into the wood that was on the ground. Luckily, she found some cardboard at the bottom of the pieces of wood. With it she hoped to keep the fire going and the porridge ready. She remembered other happy fires that she had lit in the past. She recalled the false attraction that had brought her as a girl to the city slums from the ridges far away when there were no tarmac roads.

“Kookorokooow!” the cock went again. Weereh glanced at his children who were still fast asleep as he passed by their corner in the shack. They were on holidays, he thought, and they could continue sleeping after yesterday’s hard day’s work: ferrying tree trunks and branches for firewood.

The trees had been felled some time ago on Waiyaki Way along the road. They grew on public land. Weereh family’s and others needed them for fuel.

The image of seven little bodies outlined under the best blankets the family possessed always warmed up Weereh’s heart. He was not a man to complain about having seven daughters and no sons. He was happy as he saw his wife at work preparing the ‘uji’ he loved. His wife’s diligence dispelled the sadness that the last part of the cock’s tune had left in his heart. He had long observed that after crowing with all its might, the cock was always left with something bitter that

it seemed to savor with a certain ‘hmmmm.’ It was like the sour dregs of a good *busaa* drink, he thought.

The sourly taste brought to memory his ruined business. Weereh worked as a hawker on the streets of Nairobi since he was seventeen. He was now 57. It could be said that he knew the streets and that the streets knew who he was. He was the streets in many ways. Many people had left different villages to look for fortune in the worn out city. Everyone greeted Weereh wherever he went. Like all the others, all his life, he had no license for his work and yet by law, and both the makers and the breakers knew this, it was a must to have a license. All those who sold items by the road side even when they built shops for their work as was often the case, were according to the law of Kenya, illegal hawkers. And it was as if hawkers were inhuman: hawks who snatched meat from unsuspecting human hands in garden barbecues, bad creatures.

Hawker. The word stuck as with strong glue. In local languages people called them *booonhkas*. It was a word which refused to change. A word like *duka* which liked sharing languages. Staying in local ones and engaging international ones.

Weereh got married late. He promised himself and none other than God to see that his own children ended up better placed in society. “So help me God!”, he said in his personal oath. He was not paid for swearing to educate his children. Politicians earned money for making many promises and breaking them. Weereh was an angry man.

He used to say, “*nimekata shauri, watasoma*, I have sworn they must get educated,” like one who had branded his own heart with the same words. “These are my boys,” he used to boast, knowing that the statement took his age mates by surprise. “Imani, Naliaka, Nasimiyu, Johari, Nelima, Pendo, and Nanjala, all of them my ‘boys!’” he would say again and again. In the drinking spots, they would say that Weereh had nothing to boast about since he only had girls, but he would insist that he had a song to sing about his children for all those who cared to listen. He invited them to dance to his tune.

At cockcrow he got up and fast to set off for work. He walked from Kenyalini Village to collect his wares from Gikomba Market. Later, he would return to the city center ready to dodge the City Council police and chant all day to attract customers: *“tano, tano, baba, shillingi tano, mama hapo, tano, tano, tano!* He said those *tano, tano*, meaning five shillings only, like a torrent of water flowing over rocks noisily. If he were being paid a cent per word, Weereh would end up becoming a billionaire. He had a ‘sacky’ not a piggy bank but it was worthwhile. Weereh did his job with great honesty for he believed that was a way of earning God’s blessing and of course he knew that he was God’s namesake just like Wa Ngai.

Then he heard the news. It was mid-morning. He abandoned his wares and run all the way home.

Weereh could not believe he was looking at the same place he had left in the morning. There were no homes. Government power. Those whom he left behind were in agony. Police kick them from every angle. The village is thrown into utter confusion. Little children yell. Cockerels crow. Hens cackle. Grown-ups are in a race of despair. Bigger children scream. They run. Some fall over the halters of sheep that bleat. The sun watches and no one notices how it gives a message to the moon.

Above the din, the powerful sound of a bulldozer you can hear. The askaris in helmets run ahead of it. They enter different shacks. They make a general announcement at the top of their voices, “In *faivvv* minutes we want all of you out of here! Out, out of here the next *faeeev* minutes !”

This was how the city fathers kept order. Weereh remembered his father talking about Operation Anvil with a precise date April, 24th 1954. Life was just the same then, nothing had changed. Freedom was not independence. It was not clear what Kenyatta, Lancaster House Constitution had brought home after all.

An angry hoarse police voice yells over and over again, “*Dakika tano, tano, tano ! Faiv* minutes!” And another hoarse but female voice answers back, “In five minutes, do you expect me to save my sick

daughter, the children who are out there playing, the household items or round up the goats?” Of the three *askaris* in action near her, none heard Teresia’s cry. She was lucky. She would have died with it on her lips, a signature of blood like lip seal of the wrong kind congealing in silence on her white teeth.

Weereh was almost mad when he finished putting up another shack in the same place by night. The demolishing squad had left after a day’s work. He shouted that he had changed his name to the “Sufferer”. That night Weereh’s thoughts raced fast. The familiar sound of the Kĩrũirũ River irritated him. Yet the river sang softly to his ears. He thought it flowed gently like a long prayer. It was a strong and fluid prayer of all time. It was as if he was running to Graceland in another world. This one could not be his home. He was just passing through. He suddenly shouted:

“Prayers everywhere. Prayer everything!” He could hawk to God and sell god. In the morning he left for town. He passed by a building which had a plank written “Immediate Healing of All diseases from *HaichAiV* to *Pavati* and Rats, charges only 5 Shillings each”. He took the board. He walked back home and put it outside his house. He called people to pray inside his house in a new church called “Millionaire Prayer Marathon Leaders.”

Alienated

At the Marirũ Pax Guild Training Centre a graduation took place. It was private. It was solemn. It was cold. There was no party. It was only attended by members and Wam got a new title. Miss Wam Wa Ngai's name was inscribed on the wall inside the institution. People were used to it outside, it was a simple 'Miss' but here it meant that she was celibate and single for life. Married to God, but not a nun. Miss they called her.

When Miss Wam stepped down from a *matatu* arriving from Limuru at the Nairobi Railway Station bus terminus, she could not understand what had happened in the city. Miss Wam had missed out on the news at Marirũ Pax Training Centre where she taught.

The newspaper had not been bought at the Marirũ Pax Training Centre for a couple of days. Besides all that, it was the first time Wam was coming to the city on her own after a number of years. She walked straight into high flames. Where were the *matatus*? Where were the hawkers? Where was everyone? Where was the typical Nairobi life? She wondered. Gradually as she left the lower side of the city, Wam began to see Kenya buses moving cautiously. She looked for a bus to take her towards Kangemi. She would then alight shortly before Kangemi and find her way to the directors of her spiritual life who had summoned her.

She was shocked by the piles of garbage she saw strewn everywhere. She boarded Bus 23 when it finally appeared. On the bus people talked of Kenyalini Village and the smell of the students' early morning rampage that was still in the air. She slowly understood. Anger was everywhere.

"But they pay rent to their landlords in Kenyalini Village! And they pay the President's salary from their taxes!

"But could they not plan this? Could they not give the people a warning?" "These people don't learn. Just the other day, they flattened Muoroto and today here we are!" the bus conductor said. "I

saw Muoroto go down in hours as we passed in a bus.” Muoroto is in Eastlands, Kenyalini Village is in Westlands; so east west where is the home of the poor?

“*Nyasaye atulinde, kuve nu vuti kunye vandu va Kangemi,*” a woman said in Lulogoli. If this had to be done, she wondered, why wouldn’t they give an early warning to the people so that they could organize? She said she did not like the way her in-laws flocked to her little one-room shelter in Kangemi. It went against custom for them to be in her house. Between in laws a certain distance which some even called ‘shame’ was expected, and deference.

“*Sasa hata kuvua nguo ni shida. Inatubidi tutoke nje ndiyo mmoja wetu avae na kulala kama tumekalia viti, jameni kuna mila bapa?*” She said quite astonished. Yes, indeed, how was one to undress or dress here? People had to leave the house so that the others could take off their clothes and change.

Suddenly the bus driver parked opposite Jeevanjee Gardens on Moi Avenue, right next to Moi Primary School. The driver threw up his hands in a gesture of desperation. He announced that he was afraid to drive beyond there. He said his feet were shaky because he had seen a bus burned down by students. Wam walked up to the next bus stop. She recognized something. The yellow Vic Preston Petrol Station sign opposite the University of Nairobi. She thought of joining some students to hear what they were saying. Perhaps someone had tried to warn her against going to town for her appointment and telephoned the Marirũ Pax Training Centre. The phone must have rang long after she had left. No one could reach her after that.

Everything looked dangerous. She was shaken. She heard the story for herself on a radio held by a man. It was surrounded by people who were ready to run away in all directions if police appeared. She got a clear impression of what had happened. She was dizzy. She wanted so badly to continue her journey. She could not afford to get late. She had to wait for what seemed a very long time before the driver could summon enough courage to start the bus

again. He did so with trembling legs. He had witnessed what Miss Wam had not seen.

He remembered that the only other time he has shaken like that was when driving his pick-up one misty morning, he hit a car and came face to face with Moi's own eyes. His motorcade and all vehicles stopped in an instance. He was not injured. Nobody was. The driver shook for several months after that.

Kamkunji!

That morning, the University of Nairobi woke to red posters. ‘Kamkunji’, ‘Kamkunji’, ‘Kamkunji’ they were all headed in dark black ink and posted on every available space. The word Kamkunji was enough to tell students not only of the venue but also the time. It was almost a password. For them in a word was much content: urgency, venue, resistance, danger and a politically relevant message.

The first *Kamkunjis* in Kenya took the name of the place where they were held – Kamkunji. A historical open field in Nairobi Kamkunji is also the name of a constituency, where the field is located. The first meetings held there were national *kamkunjis*. Such meetings were held to criticize the political architects of the time. Kamkunji at University came to mean a hot political challenge. Very often the themes were relevant to both the university and the country. The name of the meeting, *kamkunji*, meant there would be a reunion at cockcrow before the police got organized. Students at the Kabete campus near Kenyalini Village were alerted to be ready to move too.

“Comrades Power!” thundered Pendo Weereh, a short and stocky young woman.

“Power!” Came the answer.

“Comrades power!” She repeated.

“Power!” thundered the crowd.

“Power!” Shouted Stella raging with all the others.

“The matter is urgent. Stand up for your rights now! Stand up for the rights of the poor and the downtrodden! Stand up! Take your branches. You have read it in the newspapers. Did you see the evening edition? Kenyalini Village is no more. It has been demolished. You all know the word *murotoed*. We coined it after another slum called Muoroto was demolished! We have not yet finished rebuilding it and here is Kenyalini Village *muorotoed*!” She

said. She held the mike as if she had always been on a podium. The crowd was charged. The first circle of people around the table she stood on began to surge a little to the front.

“Comrades Power! Let’s go!” Someone shouted.

“Comrades Power!” The voice of strong Stella could be heard above others. She doubled herself bending her knees, feet apart and lifting her legs as if marching. She moved forward hands akimbo like an angry barrel about to roll.

“Power!” the crowd echoed. Another girl jumped forth from the crowd and landed on top of the platform. She moved so fast it was as if she cartwheeled there.

“I said am Chuma wa Seng’enge Chuma, do you hear me? My life will not be “*tano, tano, tano* forever!” She shouted.

“Comrades power!” She boomed again.

“Enough is enough!” She said. “Don’t fall back my sisters and my brothers! Let’s go. Follow me!”

The students were out in the streets by 7am in the morning. Shops remained closed. The students sang carrying branches and placards everywhere. They sang songs of freedom. They run down Kenyatta Avenue, crossed Kimathi Street and were at the junction of Moi Avenue in no time. They went down to Tom Mboya Street and run a long it. They stopped at Luthuli Avenue. Whistle blows filled the air. The police threw tear gas canisters endlessly at them. Transport came to a standstill. Nothing moved in the city except a crouching photojournalist running here and there at intervals. The students felt great. They had *caused* ... they said. They were waiting for the *effect*. Their message was conveyed they said.

When they went back to the university campus, they were summoned to a meeting. A male professorial voice, composed and learned came across the same park where they had stepped on the morning dew.

“Pack and go home. Your work is to study even if the city is on fire! Demolitions of shacks is none of your business students!” the

Vice-chancellor announced. There was a scary murmur of disagreement as they left. It soon burst into song:

“Power to our homes! Power to the people, to our parents! *Edukationi... edukationi ndio hii... habari ndio hii! Haiya, Mau Mau! iyei yei*, power to this nation!” “*Onololo!*” others chanted.

Police guarded Uhuru Highway which gave its back to University Way. Some of them stood by the halls of residence as students packed, hauled their suitcases onto their backs and left. It was said that many girls were raped in the halls that night. Some said it was only police who were there to keep law and order. Alone in the villages, almost every student joined the young men on the roads. The young men called them Brofesas. They got on well.

Three elderly men had come to see Ariani early that morning. They had spoken in hushed tones and then left. Many people she knew had been killed violently. That was the news they brought her. She did not break into screams. Ariani was acting the mature woman people had always said a woman had to be. Composed. Mature here had its own meaning. Inside she was in shreds.

She left the student hand written Kenyanlini paper, *Jaah* on the table for Kabi. Kabi saw the illustrations in *Jaah*. *Jaah* was produced by University students as a pullout in The Hammer, the University newspaper. Now that the students were free, three of them found their way to Kenyanlini. Rough *Jaah* copies were produced in the slums daily. Chuma Seng'enge Chuma whose name meant iron - barbed wire-iron, led them. No one would be able to stop the fire of words, she often repeated.

After the boys' departure, Ariani came in to see Kabi who was still engrossed in her reading. The sweet grandma had lost the map of serenity which was always stamped on her face. She was shocked and withdrawn. Kabi consoled her.

"Ariani, let's go over to Kenyanlini Village," She said. Ariani did not talk. She shook her head in appreciation. Kabi understood her silent expression of sorrow. Was not every pain in Kabi's own heart for better or for worse?

She finished reading the newspaper. Different headlines, same story. "Thousands rendered homeless" "City Commission 'clean up'" "Crime soars". "Children killed in swoop". "Women raped".

For Kabi, indeed, no answers could come to mind. Only questions. She remembered how the Muoroto eviction led to a long debate. A pastor said that several people had been killed in the brutal police action. Police denied it. It was a politically convenient stand to

take over dead bodies. Just to say that they were not dead was good enough politics. The dead could not speak.

Those Muoroto victims who survived were soon homeless and forgotten. The half hour visit that Kabi and Ariani made to Kenyalini Village on that Wednesday morning found the bulldozer on its second day of work.

The villagers were numb with shock. It was a new vista from what they had seen before. They spoke little. It was as if a big heavy cement wall like the one that surrounded the poor of the village to keep them hedged from the rich had fallen and crushed the poor dwellers that were seen as a threat.

Fathers stood around helplessly with their hammers. They walked around. They could in some cases, separate '*mabati*' (iron sheets) and take them away. These were the lucky ones. The national outcry stopped the police beatings. Villagers were allowed to get the nails, and iron sheets off. The newspaper reported the destruction had led to the loss of thousands of shillings – in a poor city of the world, among its poorest people.

Kabi felt all their pain in her. She had known poverty, deprivation of affection and loneliness, all sorrows personal and social.

Children squirmed behind piles of '*mabati*'. They peeped at the bulldozers and the askaris, hiding behind their mothers' skirts. Some missed falling into the uncovered latrine pits only by luck and the hands and feet of hawk eyed mothers concerned about their young like mother hens. Some children hid in the river banks for nights as they could not find their parents.

Teenagers greeted one another in protest

"*Sasa!?* Who the devil do you think lives in the head of that man who drives that bulldozer?"

"I don't get it!" Answered another.

"We shall not agree that our land is raped like this, how can we stand and watch?"

"Leave him!" said an elderly man spitting to his left side.

“No. We the young men are going to do something shocking! We rock and shock not rock and roll!” The boy answered the old man. A girl joined in the conversation. She wore a torn woolen cap with the colors of Reggae.

“He is fulfilling his masters orders, doing his job. Jaaah and I. Jaah and I will indeed deal with him, we shall get up and get our land!” She said.

Ariani went on conversing with her friends. The center of action was the bulldozer. Most people just looked on helplessly, waiting.

It was at that moment that a riotous mob of University students from the nearby Kabete campus swept in singing songs of victory and vengeance. They did not address the people about issues. They just sang and left. Scores of askaris looked at them in fear. *Jaah* words in different languages, *Jaah* Pictures flew around everywhere. Indeed there was no stopping this fire.

“Open your mouth wider Showshow!”

“Mmmmmmh!”

“Open wider! Say Ooohhh!”

The third grandmother in line opened her mouth as wide as she could. Two of her teeth were pulled out and she bled. Altogether seven teeth had been pulled out in fifteen minutes. And again Kabi heard, “Open your mouth wide, wider... very wide Showshow!” Kabi felt the pain in her own gum.

Dentistry students had organized a charity visit to Kenyanlini under the patronage of Dr. Patel. They gave a sum in contribution to the nun in charge of multi-purpose complex in which many from Kenyalini Village had taken shelter. Kabi found them in action.

As she walked down the path, an armed askari stared at her making it clear with his look that he was sure she did not belong. They did not want ‘media interference’.

“She has a camera! She must be the one making the *Jaab News*” she heard a voice say. She was disgusted but calm. She showed no reaction. She marched on quietly. To them, everyone who was concerned was an enemy. Policemen did not like exposure.

On her way back, she moved aside for toddlers that carried packs of tiny rusted *mabati* while behind them, their mothers carried bundles of steel on their backs and babies in the front.

Tears from her memory came to her eyes. Her many journeys in those days with Wakabi came to mind. She remembered caravans of slaves she had seen illustrated in a History book by Bethwell A. Ogot which she read. She overheard a mother say, “What kind of journey is this? Where are we going to? Just the other day, we left Rift Valley in pain... where is our country? Where do we belong?” She wished she could answer that.

Kabi and Wakabi are happy to be alive. Somewhere not so distant, and somewhere near, there were other women who could not

feel with pain. Did anyone care? So Kabi and her mother are fortunate.

Miss Wam alighted from the bus directly opposite Atia's house but she did not even glance at the gate. She had been convinced for many years that to love God she needed to forget her family. She even forgot that she was to alight at a bus stop called after her own brother's name: Atia's. How could she remember that and be holy? She ran to the Mainline House of her sisters.

When Kabi and Ariani came to Atia's gate, they could not even have guessed that Wam had been anywhere near there. Her life was like of those who wanted to redeem this evil world using spiritual tools alone. They were advised to leave their families and go to change others. How difficult it really was to weave action with ideals and remain oneself. Wam had on her mind what she had seen on her way to Marirũ Central Mainline.

Wam's mind was focused only on how to find her way to the Marirũ Central Mainline. She walked and then ran faster. She could get in trouble for arriving late.

She rang an eerie sounding doorbell. It was as if the heavy dark wooden door swang itself back inwards. The door knocker hang there. It was decorative since the doorbell worked. But it was ancient and traditional and had to remain there beyond the days of its use. It looked like a nose ring coming through a crude hole in the septum cartilage of an enraged Spanish bull. It continued swinging by itself. Its movement made a most menacing steel sound. Wam did not notice that. Her commitment ate her presence of mind. What she had seen in the city buzzed in her fuzzy mind. As soon as she saw a face appear, she began,

"There is trouble in the city," She said.

"Remember Wam Miss that salvation comes to those who choose to enter by the narrow gate," Maria Pillar de la Herran, the Spanish Head of Marirũ Central Mainline Guild told her. Her name meant Mother of the Pillar but no one could really lean on her. Wam Miss was not offered tea.

“On the bus people were saying...,” She went on. So impressed was she that she did not realize her name was reversed. The dead seriousness with which her superior was talking she at first did not understand.

“For the sake of your purity, Wam Miss, it is better not to look at and hear everything that goes on around you, especially in the street Waaaaam Miss!” Maria del Pillar said curtly, pronouncing her name according to her anger. PiliPili whose name meant hot pepper, joined in and repeated the same admonition to Wam Miss.

“The First Lady has been here with us. Mama says all is well with this great country. She had tea with us. We know powerful people. Keep out of these things! Their opinion is all we need. The First Lady’s opinion is relevant. Your opinion is irrelevant!”

“All right,” answered Wam Miss. She was more frightened than she had been in the city.

“You must keep your senses uncontaminated to go to heaven. Don’t be interested in things you cannot change. You are but a mite in these things!” Pilipili said conclusively. It would have been fitting for her to add, “This is the Word of the Lord!” to seal her dictatorial approach. Maria del Pillar left the two to answer a telephone call from Roma. Some documents on Wam Miss and other women members were needed urgently in the Eternal.

Wam Miss was trying to understand but she was already choking. And to think the real matter of her summonses had not yet come up. Deep down she was afraid. She felt like a stranger to herself.

When the time came, Maria del Pillar walked again into the room. She always put her nose up in the air to look taller. Wam Miss forgot to stand up as was the rule. She was trembling.

“You see, these are the little signs that show how far you have fallen! I am The Main Superior of the Guild and continue to sit when I come in?”

Wam Miss shot up quickly. She sat down after the boss had sat. Maria del Pillar told her that she had to confess little things and her many ills if she hoped to survive. Wam Miss knew she could be

thrown out of the Guild for lack of conformity but she did not expect it. She thought she had “the spirit” of the place. Many times they had told her she was great. They had made her feel wanted then. Now things were different.

In a few minutes she felt she was an outsider. Maria del Pilar left the case to Pilipili with a warning to handle it sternly. She walked off with an air of triumph. She had trampled on someone at last. But Wam Miss was defiant. How could her sins be defined by someone else? How could her guilt- if there was any- come from another conscience? One of her sins was that she did not account well for her little pocket money. Now she could not as in old times choose which of her linen was dirty and in which river to wash it. She was told what was dirty and what to do. The accusation that jolted her was still to come. The real message was yet to be delivered to her ears.

Lesbian

“When I speak to other people, they submit,” said Pilipili. “They say they have sinned, they confess to me. You are in love with Anna. Don’t deny it. You love her the way you can love a man! Too much. Girl, you know what you are? You are a lesbian. Everyone has seen it!” said the piercing shrill voice.

Wam Miss felt as if there was fire in her head. This was a bombshell. She was being attacked. She heard the words roll like thunder in her head. She was confused. Her heart beat hard. What was that?

“In Marirũ Pax Guild we do not accept people who play with hearts and sex. People who love their own sex. Sex is holy but dangerous. You are not pure!” said Pilipili.

“Who do you say I am?” Wam asked innocently.

“You hear it in our talks, the lectures we give all the time. You must not love anyone with passion. You must not touch anyone’s flesh. You are often alone with Anna. What do you do with her? How do you hold her? How does your heart beat when you see her?”

“What?” Wam managed to ask.

“You go to her room at night! Tell me what else you do!” said Pilipili. “Tell me if you lie in bed with her... if you do, and you admit, it is a terrible thing. You can hardly be forgiven. You cannot be one of us. You are an outcast, out...and outside ...you remain!”

“Lie in bed? What are you talking about?”

“You know what I am talking about of course. You are rude. You choose to keep asking what I mean, what am talking about, pretending that you do not know anything”.

“I pretend?”

“Yes. So that you can have a chance to repeat what I say! Unrefined. You know we found two girl students Ire and Jo in each other’s arms in their bed in the Training Centre area? They were copying you. You know we sent them away. It has been reported to

us that they learned this from you. And you, a teacher, a woman dedicated to Marirũ wonders! The scandal you have caused us is beyond repair! You are a whore girl! A whore. Go and read what the prophet Jeremiah says about harlots.”

“You mean Hosea? I have never been alone with Anna. I don’t know what you are talking about. I thought I was just doing my work and making the world holy!” replied an angry Wam.

“At least one of those girls, Ire has been rehabilitated. Our doctor, our own member, Dr. Miss Frances, our own member I repeat, had noticed that Ire loved to sing the fancy voice, descant. She loved to be the flowery one,” Said Pilipili.

“What are you talking about?” Wam insisted.

“Don’t try to be... you know. Ire is finally marrying a man! A real man!” Said Pilipili.

Wam was shaking. She was not thinking any more. She was confused. She had a terrible feeling of being hedged in, cornered. She felt as if there were people kicking her from all around the room and she in the Center. Pilipili was a big monster in the room. Would it not have been better if she had started by explaining who lesbians were.

“I am not a les... les... lesbian....I have never even had a crush on her... sex?”

“You cannot say such words here. Christ is in this Center You, cannot say the word sex in this Center. I can say these words. I am anointed, but you must only talk about touching and feelings and ... no. Not those words!”

Pilipili spoke all the time. It was a long and drawn out telling off. Wam felt as if her flesh was laid on a chopping board with a knife constantly cutting it. She was crying but she did not know she was crying. She was screaming silently. She did not know that she was screaming.

As she went to town, Wam had not even suspected that she was in trouble. She was unprepared for what she heard. She had only been asked to deliver a letter there by the Marirũ Head of House in Limuru. She would never have known how many letters had been

written about her to the Marirũ Mainline House in Nairobi and from there to Roma. She had been accused of so many things. She lacked delicacy, they said. She would never have known how many reports of her conduct had gone abroad to be scrutinized.

She was instructed after the session, to get a lift back to Limuru from neighbors of the Marirũ Guild who were going back there. But something had snapped in Wam. She hurt. She was crying. She felt her soul aching. She experienced her soul as a scar and her heart dead in her. Her soul scraped many times over, roughly and with sharp knives and blades. The agony with Maria del Pillar and Pilipili had been a long and painful torture.

Wam felt brutalized. She was ordered to return to Limuru and pack. She knew that when she was accused of being in love with Anna that was the end. She was stigmatized. She knew they wished to completely annihilate her. They had to kill her pride. They wanted her never to hold up her face again. It was something calculated to cage her. To ostracize her in what looked like irredeemable circumstances to the people of God.

The message was that Wam should be abused with extreme punishment that would make her bend her head and never look up again! Even though the whole idea of same sex unions was alien to her, she began to ask herself, what if she really was someone like they were describing, a lesbian, would they kill her?

Wam was commanded to leave Limuru early the next morning for she had led Anna astray. She had led the holy Anna into sin. It was as if Anna was a sick older woman being helped to walk.

Anna was a vibrant woman in her forties who had a male voice. At cockcrow, Wam was to be brought to another House of the organization in Embakasi Airport before being sent off to a different country to work. Marirũ could not bear the shame of having her in their society in their country. She felt like goods prepared for to be flown anywhere. Where to live, it was clearly said, was not for her to choose. No. It had to be done for her.

She cried when she remembered her days with her aunt, her father and Kabi in Limuru. She had stopped visiting them for the love of God. She was now a stranger to herself too. Who was she?

Limuru was at least a place her father and her sister knew well. She loved the rural life there but she was told she now had to deny herself if at all she was to go to heaven. She had to obey. But could she ever love life and have trust again? No one saw her deep wound. No one saw it. Who could she talk to? No-one was going to help her sort herself out. She was given instructions by Pilipili not speak to anyone about this. She was not allowed to visit her brother Atia and his family. Not even when they were a five minutes' walk apart. Not only that. She was not allowed to use the telephone to ring them. She had to clean her heart if she was to make it. They planned to send her to Kivu in the DRC. That would be hot enough for her, not like Limuru where she was growing horns.

She was not, under any circumstances to become too friendly with anyone, not women, nor men. Not the other members of her group or the young trainees. Not with herself. In fact, she was only allowed to teach married people how to be virtuous for now.

Sins of the flesh were defined to her again. Lust. Onany. Sodomy. Bestiality. All those unnatural tendencies the Guild said she had to hear about. The teachings from Marirũ was that the Afrikans had to be protected from the 'possibility.' Wam was instructed warned twice. She was never to tell anyone else except the anointed leader of her new group, Pilipili, what had happened to her. It was the devil that had entered her in great temptation, she was told.

She Pilipili represented the Archangel Saint Michael, and she held the keys to Wam Miss's life. Wam felt throttled. No members of her family were to know under what circumstances she had come to town. In case they came over, she was to smile and tell them of her overflowing happiness ever since she gave all she had to the Lord. Pax! Peace! She was to continue greeting people of the Guild from far. And they would always answer her, "Til eternity!"

Aborted

As Wam entered the cosy Embakasi Central Residence, she felt as if she had been stripped bare of herself. She was cold and forsaken. Wam felt naked and more shelterless than anyone without a home could feel.

Wam was as denuded as Kenyalini Village itself. She felt naked and lost. The words 'injured' and 'destroyed' would always come up in her mind. She was asked to go to confession. Pilipili insisted that Wam had much to confess. Wam felt condemned and forced to cheat her own conscience which was deep violation of her person.

She should have bolted. But she was hedged in. The choir went on and on singing about the spear lance in the ribs of Christ. They wept.

The priest arrived for his services. In the confessional box hot tears bubbled up and fell all over Kabi's face, she wept quietly sometimes her sob almost breaking freely and she feeling her big cheeks peak painfully as if ready to burst. The priest tried to console her and gave her time to pick up but she would not pretend she was well. She was tearing like old rags inside.

The priest – a good man who was hiding from the harsh world out there – was ready for his work and he sat in that box many days. He too felt disturbed when a short report was given to him about Wam in secret. The Superiors did that. It could not be said to violate confession since the priest knew about it from others, but he was expected to find that her confession conformed to their report. He was a wise man but still often impatient. He knew something was dreadfully wrong. Wam was a beautiful soul. He had seen similar situations at home in Europe and the destruction they could lead to in the victim. He knew the decision to treat her like this was taken in a meeting including another priest and lay people- a council- which he could not question. He was indignant. He obeyed his instinct. He told her to listen.

She was in her own world. He was in his own world and hers. The priest was candid. He told Wam that she had two choices. He put them before her. One was to take this accusation as nothing and with humility and become a carpet to be stepped on. “Like clay in the potter’s hand”, carry on and live carefree wherever they sent her to live. The other was to take off and start a new life and this would mean to go away. Wam told him she was too traumatized to think. She felt that the Directors owed her an apology for shocking her, but she was told that was impossible. Directors such as Pilipili were never wrong. She knew and he knew that she had to leave. That priest never knew how much sanity he brought back to Wam. She was surprised he understood her. He was clear about the identity of a person not being negotiable. They had destroyed hers. The priest did not hide it from her. He told her that she could easily spend a whole life wondering where she belonged. Homeless. He said he was ready to take the blame for her life forever.

In her room that night, she slid off her clothes and they fell onto a red carpet that was in the room. She collapsed like a heap. Then she sat naked on the floor for hours. Houses of Marirũ were not cheap. They were not Spartan in style. Not even if there was a lot space between different furnitures. Expensive things were said to save money forever because they could last hundreds of years and that is why they were purchased. That could be right but why did it cheapen her life? She sat there. She stared into the place where the two walls met in a dark little corner on the ground until she felt her bottom get numb.

That night Wam dreamt she was with her mother. She could feel her mother’s warm embrace exploring her back with a loving hand. She reached out to her like to a blanket. She wanted to put her face on Mama’s chest and breast. She wanted to bury herself there forever. She was a baby again. A baby like Jugus was. She slept. Then she was a little girl again. She held her little pink doll with its broken leg.

In the morning she knew that she had to find her mother. And she knew that her mother would understand. Would Wam be always locked in a cage by her own experience? For Wam was like an innocent child who had stretched her hand to touch and heal the world only to find it furled back to her torso. Who can limit the orbit of a person in life's universe? What can? Not the moon. Not the sun.

When Pilipili heard that Wam left their group she was not happy. She had wanted someone to torture. If she could not be tortured this way, she could suffer it in another form. Reasons had to be found for those who asked after Wam. Several versions were created.

"Wam? That girl is crazy. She slept with a man. She got pregnant!" This was the message sent out about her to everyone. The story was told without the mention of any injustice to Wam. Sometimes it was said that she refused to wash dishes at Guild Mainline Center. Other times they said that she wet her bed.

No-one had known for years why the old man in Zindu village who was a mole catcher was afraid of people. He stared at them through holes in fences for a long time. He was afraid and detached from men and women. He lived in his elderly mother's house but would not look at her. This old man dug holes and caught moles for hours and hours and spoke to the brown earth a language that no-one but himself understood.

The old man of Afrika who still lived with his mother, the old man. The man who always pushed an empty pram in a European city when he had lived abroad for fifteen years and nobody asked why he did that. He had no child. He had no wife.

He was a priest for four years. He was sent away when he started sleep walking and celebrating mass in his stupor. Now he was the old odd man of the village. The one who constantly caressed his Rosary under his old brown coat. The one who always mumbled his Hailmarys in some foreign tongue was always a lost figure in Zindu village.

And nobody cared in the society where he belonged. Nobody. This was the old man who was once the young man whom the village

had plans for. On the verge of senility, he would, facing an open green field, say stretching out his arms, “the Mass is ended, go in peace!”

And in his mind he was on the altar on which the Pope celebrated Mass in Roma and then on the balcony window giving the blessing *urbi et orbis*. In his mind’s eye, people from all corners of the earth converged in his St. Peter’s church and answered him, the old man, “Thanks be to God.”

Much pain and betrayal was written in the heart of the old man. He could not say ‘thanks be to God.’ He was deported once upon a time from Italy after a colleague accused him of being superstitious and polygamous. An African witchdoctor. His case was heard by the court in the church in Roma. He was rejected. Wam knew about him. She did not want to end up like him. She made plans.

Comfort my people!

The next day, Kabi and Rehema were in Kenyalini Village again. Only the complex of the Sisters of Mercy was left standing in the area. On her way, Kabi saw the complete result of the huge bulldozers blade. It had done a calamitous job bringing every single shelter down till the hill on which the shacks stood was a vast and open space. People put up their shacks on the hill to avoid floods. The demolition was not a deluge they could escape.

Kabi and Rehema found Sista Atieno, busy helping the people who went to her. When Kabi went closer she saw that Sista Jiru suffered. The nuns were exhausted. Sista Atieno's feet were swollen. Tired watery flesh hang loosely around the thongs of her brown leather sandals. When Kabi's eyes saw that, she felt like bending down and gathering Sista's flesh into the sandal then asking her to sit down and rest.

Most of the shelterless had jammed the school classrooms of the complex. Some slept in the church. This was a new refugee camp. The people were hungry and they expected to be fed. It was not hard to remember Jesus and the multiplication of the loaves of bread. Two fish turned into millions of protein pieces. When Jesus came to Kenyalini, his name was Dr. Patel. He brought food. He comforted those who had their teeth pulled out. They were many.

There were multiple problems. Some among the homeless, especially children and the aged coughed badly. Kabi went to the kitchen to help prepare the cabbage and rice. These would be the ingredients of lunch for thousands and for a long time. There were five women and two men at work in the kitchen already.

Kabi stood there taking in the tormented look on the face of the helpless nuns who stood amidst all the chaos watching. The nuns and Kabi knew that a country could not be run on charity, but for now they had to do what they could. The nuns' minds, eyes and voices

were filled with pain. They shared suffering together as if they were singing in a choir. But suddenly they looked frightened about everything.

Kabi had passed by her as some youngsters spoke to the nun loudly. The nun did not hear them. Kabi heard that they were asking for Cūcū Waa Chiriri. Googo's house was demolished. They could not trace her anywhere. Old and sickly Googo was missing.

Teresia was one of those helping to work. She had chopped cabbage on her feet and leaning on a huge wooden table until she felt as if she had run for miles barefoot.

"Here, take my knife," She said to Kabi.

"How good you are to come and help us. We are exhausted. Mmmmm," She added. She yawned and straightened up her shoulders. She was an energetic woman, judging from her muscles. Kabi and Ariani took up the job in silence.

Bera moved and stood quietly by Kabi.

"Where do you come from?" She asked her.

"From Warūkū," Kabi answered.

"Down the road, near the Petrol Station?"

"Yes."

"Well then you are safe!"

Kabi was eager to hear the people express their anger after living through the disaster of watching as their 'homes' destroyed. She was only too glad to hear Bera start.

"We live here. We have nowhere else to go, although the big ones think we do. They should know better than that," She finished.

"Don't worry," Kabi said.

Kabi could hear that emotion was taking over Bera's cracking voice. She did not wait to see this woman crying in her presence. Her tears glittered in the rays of the sun. She went on:

"God is on our side," She said. "He doesn't forget his children!" Bera tried hard to find something positive to keep her going, she clutched on straws as thin as seconds to sustain her sanity.

Kabi wondered if there were any sides at all which God and others could take, and she remembered Marx and the opium of the poor. She did not know that at that time Weereh had just healed twelve women of diabetes. They were singing and praising God in his shack.

Kabi eager to console Bera said, "I came here on that day, to see the askaris do their work, so that I may never be persuaded to believe it was not true; so that I may not forget what happened so close to where I live. I keep coming here to see what I read. Inhumanity. So much unrecorded."

Kabi knew that in her brother's house her world was far apart in so many ways from slum life even though Kenyalini Village was so close by. She also knew it was easy for some to target her and kill her. All they had to do is to indicate that she wanted to usurp political power and that she had imagined the death of the president. The people she knew in Kenyalini Village wanted to elect her as their local Councilor. They told her that was because from there she would rise to greater power.

She wondered why the people felt they owed her something if she served them. That perhaps is the same all the time. It is the power game that the poor have allowed the rich to take advantage of for too long in many countries. It was good that Kabi's visits brought comfort to Kenyalini Village. Some 'big' ones did not like this.

The government controlled TV and radio and ignored the tragedy of Kenyalini Village. In some newspapers, Kenyalini Village was in the news as a place which important people visited. The message the slum dwellers got from all this was that it would have been good to kill some important people like ministers right there so that the newspapers could write about the problems of the poor.

The ministers knew this and they traveled heavily guarded everywhere. The government newspaper however, declared that Kenyalini was not newsworthy. It was said to be part of the drama that some people in the West like to overplay about their Africa. If

someone came from Europe to intervene, sometimes the newspapers run bigger articles. Journalists knew nothing of Kabi or of Serem.

Wam says No

The last words Kabi heard as she left Kenyalini Village came from a crying woman, “what will, I, Nyina wa Njenga do? We were thrown out of Burnt Forest. Our houses razed to the ground. Only to come and find no home here!” That voice was loud, aggressive and hurt. Was it surprising that Kanyi’s madness had gone to its crest again?

Having given a hand to the suffering, those whose pains Kabi could only alleviate with moments of cheer and a few items to brighten the toil, she left. At Kenyalini Village, she had to try and be cheerful for of what use would it be to take tears to those who already suffered? Once she was away, it was different. Kabi’s memory was alive with sorrow. A sensitive soul, she suffered with the people. Every night she dreamt about fires. Her heart bled with pain.

Kabi telephoned Wam from home. She asked her to think of helping Kenyalini. Wam answered with a firm no. She said she had carried other peoples’ burdens only to be hurt. That was not her way anymore. Kabi had no time to celebrate Christmas. She was overwhelmed by the thought of the terrible meaning of life for these people. The weather did not help. It rained heavily. There were floods.

Wam was crying for herself, as they said in her language.

There was no resurrection for Kenyalini Village. Wam had to hope there would be a new life for her but there was nothing. On the third day, each day seeming a decade for those who suffered, Kenyalini Village was flattened like a pancake. It was on that day the big bulldozers accomplished their work, driven by the power of overzealous men. They undid the work of loving hands that built shelters for loved ones, giving final blows to the shelters. Light building materials flew from walls and danced in the sun.

The slum was a big clear mud field with iron sheets, blood, clothes planted in it. No more the laughter and chuckles of children.

No more room for lovers running to hold each other behind shack.
No more bleating sheep and goats, or so the authorities thought. No
more room for aged ones. Kabi wrote:

When will the morning,
the awaited alba, come?
Can a heart
that has loved
with the depth of soul
be without sorrow filled
at such early decay?

On that third day, women, men and children still carried bundles
of clothes, cooking utensils, door frames and *mabati* to nowhere.
Many of them lifted their shelters again to escape from the harsh
wind and rain. But their lives were only to be lived once and they
would never be the same again.

What about the little one -week- old Timi who hungrily suckled
at Auma's breast the way Jugus used to? What now? Little Beatrice
clutched her mother's skirt and cried loudly scratching her own
swollen stomach. There were dangers there. Exposure to: the cold,
diarrhea, pneumonia, hunger, anger and uncovered pits filled with
human waste. Worse things would be repeated in time: polio, more
violence, rape. Disease and poverty. It was time to act.

Regeneration

On that third day, however, the great suffering that threatened to stiffen Kabi's heart was thawing. Something new was happening in her soul. The power of love and compassion was shattering the walls of hopelessness that took every opportunity to creep into her heart. There was something new. Her tears cleaned her heart until it shone. This would take very long to happen to Wam. She was the Dead Sea, Lake Magadi, laden with thick deposits.

Kabi felt powerful. She walked on, even when each step seemed to be more difficult. She stopped when she saw the spot where Googo Chiriri's shack used to be. The place where Googo had danced for them and told them stories. The spot where Googo had recited what she called the law of the faith – her creed- with toothless gums that stuck to her lips that sucked one on the other in her mumbles. She had told stories with the warmth and fervor of her heart. A fervor which Wam would never own was natural for Googo. It was born free in her heart. A fervor which Wam would never muster in the Marirũ Pax Guild. Wam could not find refuge in peace with Afrikan ways. She felt as if to be good she had to renounce her identity. She had lost herself in an almost irreparable way. What could one say of a person afraid of knowing their spiritual ancestry? Being free to be oneself?

The shacks started coming up again every night after the demolition. Demolished in the day, up in the night. One by one they came up like mushrooms until the tenth day. The council askaris most of them biting their lips, flattened them again. The men biting their lips put them up and held hammers in their hands as they looked around for nails. That became the normal pattern.

That day Rehema showed Kabi where her mother once lived. The all-pervading question hit Kabi again, "Why did this have to happen?" Kabi was pleading for an answer, not only for herself, but

also on behalf of many that were so full of valor. Life for them had to continue.

Pain alternating with a beautiful commitment was courting her heart. The experience was similar to that of a woman who after wanting a baby for long feels the first hints of pregnancy stirring warmly in her body. And yet no sign was certain. Things appeared different every second.

Kabi had always been impressed by the fact that pregnancy was never first sensed in the womb. For some women the alarm, and it was always an alarm, started in the tongue. A steely taste on the tongue persisted. For others the outer ear, which is shaped like a womb, or is the womb some say. If only men could feel they conception or pregnancy in their outer ears. Some sign to announce conception. Some women got an itchy dry skin all over and very sensitive nipples before they missed their monthly period. The last two were the unmistakable signs that the womb was visited. But now Kabi's tongue was bitter, her skin dry all over. Her breasts were gorged. She knew she was not pregnant. Maybe a call to politics was the milk tightening her breasts.

Where does the love for life come from? Where from the defiant spirit of the slums, where from its hope and life? These people loved. They embraced life. Life was worth living. They were endowed in a way many of the wealthy will never know. So many rich ones committed suicide at the slightest incomprehension. Here in the slums, people were jolly.

They were warm hearted in a way many men and women rich and poor will never live to be. These poor loved in a bleeding way that the greatest poems of love can only aim to describe. But the other side of deep love is negative. It carries profound wounds. Etched in like icons they remain when love falls apart.

Kabi thought hard. In a nation, pain is guaranteed if love is not the right side up of the governance coin. Love? Love is not for closets but also for all public policy. Christians had it as their

command, but it was hovering in between things. A feeling. Not sweat and blood.

A positive slum spirit hugged Kenyalini Village tight and held her together with the other parts of the city. She had power over the rich Resho and Kyu areas. Kenyalini could make those places uninhabitable but she let them be. Her people served tea and coffee in high places, cleaned toilets and could abuse children whose rich parents travelled far and wide. Most of them did not. That was before the pain cut too deep and the people in Kenyanlini Village saw that they would always be on the hard side. Kenyalinians decided then to have their own ruthless militias to guard them. Police would be kept off at all costs. The people became their own security. Askaris had demolished their homes. Police were not protecting them.

There was a time when it would have been possible to plan and sow more goodness, not evil. But that time had passed. That time, when a free spirit was stronger, had come and gone in Kenyalini.

The time when people pleaded for peace and prosperity, not machetes to cut one another was gone. There was a time this good spirit went before the people and surrounded the city, hugging it; now goodness had to be courted back home.

If this good spirit remained and was fed with prosperity and peace, the city would be safe. But things were unpredictable and fragile. Many stirred up slum dwellers were fast turning against others and against themselves. All violence returns.

Kabi thought she sensed relief sometimes between Wam's little smiles, but that was once every so many years when they would meet. It is true that much healing is done through sharing words. Wam spoke little. She did not write. She was often in a church and quiet.

Little Malaika and her sister Nakupenda had a lovely black complexion. Not shiny but it enhanced the white of their eyes wonderfully. Nakupenda seemed thinner in appearance and therefore slightly taller. Both girls had charming faces. Malaika's was enchanting with a half cheeky smile.

Kabi habitually remembered the day she met two girls, Malaika and Nakupenda, in the Kenyalini Village's open area. Sayari an old friend of hers had begged her to take her there.

"Do you have something for us too?" Malaika asked.

"I've only got things for boys and men today, all of them from my family," replied Kabi.

"Well, we have brother and father too," said Malaika. "We will take them to them."

Kabi and Sayari were afraid. They thought their items would be grabbed by two boys who were watching. They stood on the other side of the path. Would the girls be safe? How could Kabi and Sayari dare drop their eyes to open up the bundles? The boys notice their hesitation. They come up to them. They greet the women and leave.

Nakupenda and Malaika follow the 'visitors' to the hall. At the entrance they are sent away by a watchman. Sista Jiru is busy inside. Sayari and Kabi give out the clothes. Kabi kept two T-shirts and two pairs of shorts with her. She hoped to find Nakupenda and Malaika on her way out. She did.

"We got a beating!" The two girls said.

It was frightening. It was the watchman who beat them. They did not complain to Sista Jiru because that is what the Math teacher used

to do when they failed tests. That is what the teacher on duty used to do too when they arrived a minute late. A beating on the behind. A minute late after fetching dark water from River Kĩrũirũ in the morning. A beating on the palms of the hand.

“No! but that is unfair!” said Kabi

“Time to say: No!” said Kabi and Sayari in one breath.

“Here you are. Girls can wear these to cover their backs and to look good!” added Kabi

Hardly had she held out her hands than the two girls simultaneously said, “*asante!*” and instantaneously grabbed a T-shirt and shorts each and then ran in the same direction like a high wind.

The girl’s pace was the same. The visitors gazed in astonishment as they went up and down little mounds at top speed. They disappeared from sight. They and all the little children standing around could still hear the girls’ ‘*asante!*’ said in unison ringing in their ears. Kabi and Sayari walked back and told the watchman off. They spoke to him without humiliation but the message was not coded.

Looking back, Kabi and the visitor saw the two boys catching up with them. This time they walked confidently right up to them.

“We have come to say ‘thank you’ and to explain to you why the girls ran off,” One said.

“We’re very grateful. May God help and guide you. They were just afraid that the others would take their gifts from them and so they run off to hide them. That’s all.”

The other boy took over. “Our sisters look wonderful in shorts. They are a little shy but they will soon be out to play. Look, they are coming... We shall go back and meet them.”

Kabi and Sayari parted ways and each went home. Kabi went round the neighborhood and spoke to many asking for donations for the families in trouble that night. She visited Malaika and Nakupenda’s family many more times. Their mother said to her, “This is a real *Kirithmathi* for us. It is as if our girls met the wise men – no, wise women visiting Kenyalini Village.”

Many saw Kenyalini Village's suffering in the same way one watches a football match knowing full well there will be winners and losers. But not Kabi. For Kabi, Kenyalini Village's pain was engraved on her mind and soul forever. Compassion, feeling with the pain of the other became her oil of beauty.

Kenyalini was a living jewel loved in spite of the pain of loss that transformed it into a carrier of memories of pain. It changed her life, this pain. The suffering of Kenyalini Village became an icon of humanity in her soul. It took over the wounds of the love she had for Will, making that love alive and real again. Will was alive in her spirit. Kabi was surely still a child of life to whom a night - bird told stories.

If Kenyalini Village could be sheltered by Kabi's thoughts, Wam could find a home in Kabi's beaten but winning heart. But Wam had learned to hide her inner self. She hid from everyone even when Kabi's tender heart was the perfect place Wam could rest and be reborn. Wam could never express her entire pain. Someone else needed to take it and feel it as their own. If Wam did manage someday it would be after many years.

The moon watches how we live. It wanes and waxes for us and then it is full. Something changes. Ask the sea. Ask the womb. Ask the color red. A bird flies by and sees some lines in the river of ancient poetry.

In the same place in the last day of any year people wait for a brand new year. This happened in Kenyalini too. The clock ticked and then someone began to beat pots and pans. Women quickly contributed their sound of joy. Many villagers joined in. Shouts of "*Hapei niu yia!*" began to steal into the village from different corners. All around some spent the light hours going to visit friends and to talk.

The New Year here was welcomed with the beating of empty pans and steel pots. Ululations furiously parted the air from the mouths of older women. Many people cried tears of joy. They were dying for something new.

People made noises to mark the passing of time. They shook empty pans declaring they would overcome in spite of the prevailing hardships. An old word, solidarity. But it was new in different ways at different times. Even under the heavy loads, this coming together brought joy to all hearts. Informal education in the hall of Kenyalini village could stand up to poverty.

The stars are shining

Kabi could sense some good news on the way. Premonition. She wondered what it could be but soon after, Ariani returned from the Kabete Post Office, she thought she got the answer. There was a letter with Canadian stamps for her. She opened it eagerly.

Dear Kabi,

How are you? We are all fine here. Jwak and I have just come back from assisting in a community well fare project. As you know, over here, the poor are helped in all their needs by the government. Clothes, medicine and food are given to the needy. Many of these are refugees from our continent...

I know you will agree with me when I say things must change at home. That Governments must feed their people and make them feel happy to belong home. Charity will never suffice!

I read your letter with joy and sorrow too. I am happy that you are having a break. We are sorry however, to hear about Kenyalini Village plight. I send this for you to donate to the multi- purpose center. No holidays for us. Comfort yourself and those people you love so much on our behalf. No need to tell them where it comes from.

I hope one day soon you will have the chance of seeing Jesolo and Jan. Jwak and I are so proud of the J family and also of Wa Ngais and of Wakabi. He calls them the W & K family. He wishes to come home soon for he says he misses the sun. I miss it even more. He has a deep wonderful singing voice. I wish you all the best and hope to hear from you soon,

Love,

Aris and Jwak

Kabi set off at once to the Multi-purpose Center. More than fifteen families were still living in poorer structures than the ones that the bulldozer destroyed. These houses the sun saw first when it rose on the eastern corner of Kenyalini Village. Many of the villagers

moved to a zone that they gave a new name - The Ghetto. The sun set there. Each visit to Kenyalini Village seemed to add new life to Kabi. She remembered Malaika and Nakupenda often. She had many friends there.

One day, as she walked through the demolished slums, Kabi looked up and saw Dama Atieno in a blue and white dress that used to be her own. It was a Sunday and Dama was in her best dress. Dama stood on a high mound on the ground.

“You are here again! *Karibu!*” She said happily. The bond between them was strong. She had promised Sayari, her University times friend, and now a senior lecturer in Sociology at the University of Nairobi to return to Kenyalini with her.

“Yes, I’ve come, just to say ‘*jambo*,’” she answered. “And I bring my friend again.”

“That is what we like, Kabi. We ask for no more than friendship. I have never begged in my life. I’ve been reduced to this,” Dama said. A tear shone in Dama’s right eye. Soon Dama, Kabi, Pendo wa Weereh and Sayari were seated in one shack, around a smoky fire. It was cold outside. There were half cooked kidney beans in a *sufuria* on the fire but the wood was wet.

Kabi’s eyes streamed with tears. She had to go out of the shack for a while. As in those days long ago, the smoke forced her tears out. Sayari followed her closely, also rubbing her eyes.

When Kabi managed to look up she saw, a blind woman, helped by her grandson, coming down the slope toward the shack. “Mungu, we got visitors while we were away,” she said.

“Mama Nonii is not here, but come in. We are here because God is in us and has preserved us.” The happy granny, who was called Googo Nonii, did not know that Kabi and Sayari had already been inside and left because of the smoke.

Kabi re-entered the hut where Dama and Nonii were chatting. She was embarrassed. They had no tears in *their* eyes. They told the visitors not to fear, for the wet wood had been removed and the beans said to be finally cooked. A glance at the beans told Kabi that

they were not quite ready and maybe would never be. Perhaps the beans rejected being boiled.

Sayari's eyes were happy now. She readily brought out a notebook. Kabi asked Googo sweetly to tell them stories. She said she wanted to know more about life and their life. Sayari asked for permission to write.

Googo cleared her throat. She loved Kabi well, she wanted to please her and her friend. She felt honored with a chance to do what Kabi wanted.

Her daughter Mama Nonii had gone to sell some of the vegetables they had been given to eat. Googo started to tell her own story in her language:

“Even if you see me as I am, I used to go to work. You could laugh or cry today but I worked really hard and well. I know you will not laugh as you hear me because you see I gave my blood there. For many years went to work in the coffee plantation across the valley – Gwa Kanugi. We had not *kandarasi*, contracts, you just went... and worked.

After some time the farms were bought and divided into smaller building areas. We had no shares of course. On each of the sectioned plots of land large villas with gardens were built. Are you unfamiliar with the beauty of Resho over there and Kyu over here... she pointed asking. I settled in Kenyalini Village in 1968. Uhuru ,you all know, *dependensi* came in 1963.”

She wiped her tears and blew her nose. “Uhuru, *dependensi* came some ten years and some months after *majeneti*, (Emergency) and after Kimaathi Wa Wachiũri was executed by the MuBritiithi.” She cleared her throat.

“This land was ours since 1968. In the past, when we were harassed many times and asked to leave. It was always by Kanjoo (Council) authorities. We cried to he who seemed to have all the keys of the land, Kenyatta. He used to give and take soil. He kept *taito diidi* for many of us.

In 1977, he declared that we should never be evicted from here. But it seemed that he was giving out land as if from a private purse. Other people claimed the same land too. They took it the other day. The court stands with them today. So we lose always, all the time. In Lands office, eh, *Kwa Randi*, they told us the title was changed to a rich man's name! The rich man is *gavamenti*! Rondi Dramia is the boss there! *Ũũiiii!*"

She paused and her mind jolted back and got stuck on the moments of that day of the eviction as if in slow motion. She exclaimed, "*iritiiii iritiaaa... tiaaaa aaaa raaaaga aaaa!*" Can you imagine how the cold has pinched us all these days? On that day, I was in the hut. Maaskari (many policemen) came and spoke to me speaking in my own language but making it sound like Englishi. "Makara, (means charcoal but they meant elderly one). Then they called me Mokora (the thug) and other times Makoro, (leaves) ...Makara he told me, stay out there for the *tinga tinga katabila* is coming. Oh, how we lost all our property! I was never to find my handkerchief in which I had tied up my money," She said sadly.

"We don't know who stole from us, but we know." She began to sing. "*Meeegite meeegiteee... megitetene... meeegitete... megitern megi... terne kutie Alleluia!*"

"In this area, I tell you, God is our Keeper". Sayari wrote even more furiously.

Googo went on to tell the wonders of the Compassionate One. He was the one who made sure that children were not crushed on that day. He is the one who taught Weereh to cure diseases. Habiba was not crushed by the cruel bulldozer driver because of the power of the kind One protected her, Googo said. It was because of Aba she was saved.

"It was that kind One, full of mercy, who watched over me and the fever stricken young Symphrosa Onjiko, Anjou's only daughter; who was lying unconscious in bed. It was the kind One, who looked after us. He is the one who looked after that mother who slept in the cold suffering from asthma. Where we now sit was the area for the

crippled, the helpless. It is at the entrance to the village where we sing our praises to the owner of all beauty. All of us do that. That space was the first to taste that blade and the wrath of that machine, that was driven by the Evil One.”

Everyone breathed out and all took a deep breath spontaneously. Then no one heard any breathing and suddenly there was absolute silence. Slowly Googo seemed to sink into her own soul as if to behold and release her own spirit. She was in a stupor. Something took Googo away. She was far away. She spoke about ancestors. Everyone went quiet. Something that they could not describe enveloped them. They could not hear the birds singing. Googo spoke like one who addressed invisible beings. They went off with Googo in the reverie.

Googo kept talking to a third person that she called ‘Aba’, the kind One. She was in command. They breathed in beauty from the strange and unusual silence that could only bear their breaths. Warmth filled them. They were in a never- ending communion, it seemed. Then they came to slowly like people who had been far from their own being. Slowly they all returned to themselves. Googo heard a voice calling her by many names. She answered that she was not only present but also committed to humanity. Her voice was in the same note to all:

“Yoooo!”

“Gueno!”

“Yoooo!”

“Googo!”

“Yoooo!”

“Showshow!”

“Yoooo!”

“Aieyoo”

“Yoooo!”

“Kuku!”

“Yoooo!”

“Omama!”

“Yoooo!”

“Nona!”

Yoooo!”

“Abuela”

“Yoooo!”

When they could all see each other again, Sayari started writing immediately. She wrote about the beauty of traditional prayer.

Kabi closed her eyes. When she opened them anew, she saw a shining but crumpled heap of a human figure that was Googo, a living fire of life. Wrapped up in the one dirty coat that she had worn for years on end she was a holy shrine. Googo had never owned another coat. She wore it all the time. People thought she never wanted to wear anything else other than the old thin and worn coat.

This coat was her humanity. Her flag. She never changed it. This coat always covered everything else she wore, no matter how hot it was. She was every grandmother. She was every hard times’ grandma. Tough. Her inner vision was omnipresent. She was a spirit. She was full of a light strong enough to penetrate all blindness. She was a pillar of fire. She commanded authority presenting her case before the throne of the high one and she was god. Yet in her prayer, she ceaselessly thanked ‘Aba’ for the visitors. She asked the Creator to fill their minds with wisdom and learning. She asked that their works would reach far so that, they who were out there would learn to turn back and help the suffering. She was living hope. She trembled recalling the sufferings of many she had known. She said all people were a chosen race.

Kabi called the children in to share the milk Sayari had brought. She had spent over one dollar on it. Sayari poured out some for Googo. She also poured out some for the children. Then as she looked down at her notes, she saw little droplets of milk falling. She felt more tiny drips so cold touch her face. Googo was spitting out

on her own chest in a ceremonious way. Her invocation was a traditional one:

“May this milk cleanse our intestines and us! May it become rain again for our gain! May it return where it came from and be clean forever in the cows! May we become ourselves again, powerful humans, people of the milk of compassion.”

Another world

When Wam stepped out of the subway, she was excited. That so many people were alighting and boarding a train that ‘flew’ beneath the earth had filled her with anxiety. Now she was almost free. Was she at the right station? Yes she was, but what a maze of stairs and paths everything seemed here. She was glad to see Aris. After a warm hug, they got onto a bus and were in suburbs in a few minutes.

From the top of University Hill, Wam was delighted to see the entire city of Montreal. She looked around in wonder. She listened to Aris telling her a little history of the town.

“These ships leave from this port on Lake Montreal and take stock to other ports in Canada,” Said Aris. Wam, who had not seen Lake Victoria or the Indian Ocean back home, was fascinated.

Aris pointed out some old churches. They went through La Chine. Later Wam would buy herself a pink long nightie and a black doll there. She had never seen a black doll at home.

“This is one lecture theater,” Aris said. “It would take us too long to see the whole campus. In spring, I get hungry very quickly. Let’s rush home. You are tired too.”

Wam saw couples holding hands and others kissing everywhere she looked. “Things are different here,” Aris told her. “You will find good insights for your social study. Your topic –sex among village youth- is exciting. You will find good contrasts with what you will see here. I don’t say better!”

Wam wondered if sexual feelings were more openly displayed by wealthy people. Was it a need they had to do this or were they showing their class? Poor people hid their intimacy. She was curious about Aris. She always smiled like one who was in love. This smile was hovering all over her face, not just on her lips.

They were presently in the house of Aris and Jwak. They had hardly sat down when a strange squeal made Aris jump. *Oirprrrporirpp*

shhhrrrrr!. Aris was used to her own doorbell but not so when it was rang so loudly! Jwa, as they called him came in. He gave a little kiss to his expectant wife and welcomed Wam with a firm handshake. A glowing Wam smiled. It was that look they feared in Marirũ Guild. A look full of love and affection. A look she had hidden for years. Wam was quiet but she was warm. She was always at once at her best where books, thoughts and feelings were not censored.

Aris stood happily on the soft green carpet in the cosy sitting room glad to see her sister in her home at last. Soon they some drinks were offered. Aris understood Wam's wonder about her life in Canada. She told them she looked forward to seeing a log cabin. Jwa immediately promised a journey by train.

Wam was keenly listening to the stories Aris told her. One was about violence in the family that lived next –door. The two fought over the beddings every night. Sheika took more of the blanket to her side, Pierre would complain. It did not matter that they had central heating. In the end he complained about her perfume, her bras, her fat belly and he bitterly explained how she snored to their counselor. Sheika said she hated his height with all her might. It was as if they had met only one night and in the dark before their glamorous fairytale wedding with horse driven carts and a cake high enough never to be forgotten! The break was inevitable. They took their two children to boarding schools as they filed the divorce proceedings.

A week went by. Jwak always marveled at Wam's resilience. She would jog to the campus first thing in the morning, read for hours and still get home with a smile. But why was he surprised? It ran in the family. Pregnant Aris climbed hills fast. She was always in a good mood.

Wam wanted freedom from schedules. She explained how she hated that word 'schedule' all her life. Anyway was it pronounced like 'she' in shepherd or like 'ski' in 'skip'? Who cared. She naturally opposed anything that appeared to be rigorously programmed. She was haunted by her past. It took much courage for her to turn against

what she had been made to believe was the only thing God made her to accomplish on earth. Orders and schedules.

Wam had enjoyed her stay right from the start. On Sunday all went to church. She joined them. There, she sat quietly but felt like a sack full of dense flour- immobile especially at the waist. Had she become a pillar of salt? That is what her superior would think, if she saw her. ‘How small a god they made!’ Wam said to herself, smiling in her soul. Wam could never have guessed that she would not only get a doctorate but also become a professor.

As she and Aris chatted, fresh laundry was tumble drying and the air smelt fresh and clean.

The Kĩrũirũ River flowed on in Kenyalini. It was the season in which the river swelled. As Kabi and Sayari walked home that day, the river was alive with Googo’s power. It was as if it chanted her words again and again, on and on with a new determination. The clearer water swirled around the reeds, in and out and downwards it went fast. Water cleaned by earth.

The river hummed and chanted on. It separated the Loresho mansions from Kenyalini Village in a matter of steps. No bird sang. She could still hear Googo speaking to her.

“We might sleep in different beds, but we do need to be equal in having something to put into our mouths, some bread for all! Bread of justice. Of meat each may eat what they can afford. Beans and maize are enough for me! Why beat us down like this? It is evil!”

Hurting eyes

Kabi opened her eyes for the first time the next morning after sleeping all night through. They hurt. She closed them. First she remembered the smoke that had made her weep like a child. Then she remembered the big drops of tears that had rolled down her cheeks as she knelt down by her bed trying to pray, to meditate, to find herself. She did not have the suave way of meditation that Googo had. It was not easy. It would never be easy to find balance in spirit.

Kabi's strength was still tied up with deprivation. Despair blew around her like a haunting wind. But she grabbed it as a sail for her boat of life. "Hope", the bird had told her that night on her way home, long ago. She knew she could never expect justice on the loss of Will. There was something that tied her life to Googo's and the slum people's fate. Kabi saw victors; where others saw losers. Was there something unheard in the endless song of the night - bird still?

For Kabi it was wrong to hide behind one's own duties, religious ideas; and pain. It was sinful to live as if God were a policeman who could be easily bribed. Or as if God was a shelf filled with answers to social needs. She would stand up for herself. That became the creed of a stronger Kabi. Perhaps it was because of Googo's words.

Old Googo, Kabi realized, had reached that place where the heart and the mind celebrate united in spirit. Who flew her there? The place, when and if reached keeps the person in delight of the experience and never stops searching for completeness in meaning. The place where some marry joy and meaning in their lives whether darkness or light surrounds them?

Was it the place too of the greatest resistance or acceptance of injustice? Could the two live together? For Kabi, it is the place where some poets make verses that smash us inside with their marvelous ability to eat pain and turn the ugly into something worth looking at

again and again with love power, sometimes sprouting and sustaining revolutions.

It was in that place where no contracts are signed but nobody betrays. The place opened to a few. A place where the bond of human solidarity never breaks, a place. This place where Googo's heart was at all times. If a whole village discovered this place together, she thought, their part of the world would change forever. There would be no devouring one another in the face of pain, disconnecting on the basis of race, tribe and class but connecting.

It was a unique place that no one reached just like that even when they choose the spiritual path. But there is always, there are always people there, even if only a handful. It is a gift of a place. A place most politicians disliked.

This special place is reached by some couples together. Will and Kabi were once there. Then the couple is inseparable but not just because of oaths sworn. Their power withstands everything. It is a place reached by some mothers in the love they have for their children. Well, sometimes. A common story was that of a mother who rescues a child from the jaws of a crocodile without any other weapon but love.

Nooni's daughter Rosa, Googo's great grandchild was seriously ill in Kenyalini Village when the bulldozers struck. Nooni was not at Kenyatta Hospital when Rosa, her daughter, died. She had skipped the visiting hour that evening. Her heart was reached by strong tugs and silent voices that her daughter sent saying farewell to a distant mother in a child's last instances of life. Nooni felt and heard them but she hoped against hope that the worst had not come. She was a captive of many problems.

The tugs: it was Rosa promising her mother that she would fight for justice beyond her death. Her voice did not turn Nooni back from the path of seeking food for the other little children who surrounded her with hunger and tears. The children only wanted to eat and to see their sister Rosa return home. Rosa's silent calls did not turn Nooni's feet to her bedside in the big hospital. Perhaps that visit

would have been too much for her to bear. Some said Rosa died as visitors - a whole intimate crowd from Kenyalini Village and Kangemi - sang prayers for her to recover.

There were drumbeats at Noon's house before a word had been spoken. There were mourners arriving at the door within no time. They spoke many languages. Many of the old from different cultural backgrounds stood in a reverential hush; and hid their tears. A sad drum beat started. The music escorted Rosa's soul to a new world - distant and unknown to the drummers who went on and on. The song of the drum also broke the news gently to the people.

Kabi was there. She stood right in the middle of the surging crowd in the slum that drew her back and forth like a magnet. The people stared in one place as if an invisible Rosa sat there. Kabi looked up and saw Sayari making her way through the crowd towards her. She saw that people knew death had come even before news that a soul had gone was broken. It was in their bones.

Rosa's father, Wenani, was there. He had wept inconsolably and chanted endlessly in a language of many tongues. He was carried out as grief wrenched his whole body. He wailed. He run and stopped. Run and stopped, run... One unfamiliar with his people's way of mourning ways would say he danced. Some complained that it was only women who should mourn like that. The men who caught Wenani and sat him down were strong. They demanded guarded silence from all who drew near Wenani so that spirits would leave him in peace.

A strong woman's voice could be heard. She danced in a traditional way but was dressed in strange white and red robes. Not in what people call African colors. On Sundays she was a bishop in their local church.

Sayari said this tradition allowed grief to be expressed openly, vehemently and defiantly. There were exceptions. Rosa's sisters were helped by their aunties to cry out loud. It was not true that some people naturally reacted in the same way -crying out loudly at the

news of death-to certain things just for being members of one community. Sayari knew much about stereotyping.

But most people were lost for words. Their foreheads burnt in the late afternoon sun. Rosa's age mates screamed and expressed themselves freely and for them, there was nothing to hold them back in mourning.

Each person allowed themselves to call out the pain of their loss, so that the others could give their consolation. Sayari saw what *she* saw. She said it was her study. Kabi's heart was one with the people. She had no feeling that she was doing anything different from anyone else or studying anyone. She was at home.

I'll be watching you

Just after she dipped into her sleep after a tiring day Kabi suddenly woke up. It was as if someone had called her or touched and shaken her in bed. Then she heard the bird sing... *'Laaallaaa Laaaallaaa! La ala la allaaa, laaala. Laaa!'* Then slowly the words changed. 'Whippoorwill. Whip poor Will, whippoorwill!' She heard. 'Whippoorwill. Whip poor Will, whippoorwill!'

Kabi felt the deep pain of the loss of Will cut her afresh. Was it possible to say that she missed him whom she loved forever and could never find again? It was to her unbelievable that she could not find Will somewhere. She was very tired.

In her imagination, again, she saw Kenyalini Village turn into a bloody womb with walls falling, crumbling. The image of a helpless father standing there with a hammer in his hand flashed through her mind. She clearly saw another kind of demolition of human shelter. Then a ringing phone pierced the silence of the night.

"Darling sister!" Wam shouted.

"Wam! Wam! Wam! How are you?"

"I have to tell you... now at this time when calling is cheaper... Kabi..."

"What is it?"

"It is no less than a resurrection! I was dead!"

"I know!"

"It has been long struggle!"

"Oh, Wam, and mine too!"

"Well, for a long time I felt aborted but just as well... it was rough, worth the courage for I had to make it!"

"I have only just understood why you were so reserved," Kabi said, adding,

"What you are telling me is incredible. What a pity they did that to you in the name of church! Marirũ Pax Guild indeed!"

“You are right to be angry. Their way made me know the agony of a helpless fetus. I was really destitute. And to think that I was only trying to grow spiritually,” said Wam.

“When you come back you will meet Googo!”

“Who is that?”

“You will never despair again!” Kabi finished off saying.

Soon they wished each other well and replaced the receivers almost simultaneously although they could not see each other. They would never know too that they both rushed to the bathroom after that conversation, almost with the same number of steps. They both sat to a rich cup of milky tea after their chat continents apart. Kabi stroked her hot cup of tea with her right hand and then clasped it with both hands. In the palm of her hand she felt happy. She felt warm. Wam patted her hot cup of tea with her right hand and then clasped it with both hands. In the palms of her hand she felt happy. She felt warm. They each looked at the black telephone sets stuck in the corner yet reaching so far.

Kabi and Wam had both known the pain of standing before a frightening chasm of unknown depths and then crossing it with wide open eyes. Their parents before them, Atia and Adau and many people in Kenyalini Village and a few of the rich, people from of all generations and class; have at one time or another stood before this vacuum in life, stood before this place not chosen, staring at possibility of life or death. It was a moment in which one had to find themselves. Some people said they were saved. Saved from danger. Saved from vice. In their own name or in the name of Jesus. Lately, it was more in the name of Jesus, not tradition or community affiliation. Not in the sharing of pain.

Kabi thought hard. How to stand firm in that place of strength found inside each person, to find it in the first place was the question. Only each person could find it themselves. How to stand in that unique place and stay there and still move. Move and show it to others without losing it was the question. Could that be done without stealing another's freedom? That to her was part of the question.

Bird Morning

A beautiful morning typical of the fine December fell out of a dawn full of life. Kabi's heart and mind open up deeper and wider like the happy flowers that surrender themselves to the first morning rays that kiss their dew.

A tiny chestnut bird with yellow-tinged wings flew and alighted on the fence opposite her kitchen window. It was very little indeed, but it set the green fence on fire with its own life. It sang clearly, cheerfully, steadily, vibrantly and insistently, as if it was injecting all its little powerful life into the song. Sang as if it was singing of its strong will. Kabi was completely captivated.

Deep warmth nestled in her heart. She was filled with a strong desire for ever greater renewal, a rebirth whose gentle coming was unexpected. This was warmth she could share with Wam and everybody who needed it. Yet an alarm rang in her.

Something was very clear on her mind. It was fine to live life with certain pleasure, to live almost playfully, for if she tried to speed up things too much, she could give up. The path of greater commitment was a delicate one to choose. She could lose her whole self in it. Wam had. Still, desire for justice, a love and hope for it, propelled her. She felt light and happy. She was a little bird landing on a happy branch. She was gone with the word, the song of the bird.

She felt relaxed. A lot of fresh energy swam in her being.

The bird sings what it sings. Where did it find hope? The word hope was in the hook of the beak of the bird and in the song the bird sang every day. Why? It was written in everything but only some saw it. It was riding in the wind. The bird picked this word with its beak from a dying river. Gogo dropped it there from her trance. Many spoke of her as if she were dead. The bird knew that she was alive. The bird as it flew by saw the word 'hope' sailing down on water in the night. The word sailed without a boat. It was not easy for the word.

The bird swooped for the word more than a hundred times and finally it pinned it in its beak and it hang out on both sides of the beak like a little fish ready to be eaten. The bird swallowed the word and instructed it to stay in its chest so that it would always come out of its beak to speak quickly, in a magical moment. The bird sang to people it loved.

The bird chose these people in the evenings when it saw the first light of stars that humans did not mark. The ray passes on as at the beginning when the sun seems to travel fast across the blue sky. When the sun sears the heavens, cleaning them before the rain falls and cows make milk of grass.

The bird saw starlight rising, humans saw sunset. It was a talkative bird. This nightjar told Kabi this story of where it found the word in her own ear in its own words and language at that time that you remember. It told her that it saw other words. That it heard them when it flew above a swimming river. It said that rivers swam better than seas and fishes in their incessant flow. At night -time the bird was a nighthawk that could change into a silvery star.

With its fierce eye, it decided freely always which words to eat, after turning them over in its head and heart as it sang, deciding, which words to remember often and which ones to forget. The night - bird decided then which words to share and with whom. It shared words with other birds too. It is a bird that knows war. It is a bird that knows freedom. A bird that knows rejection. A bird that treasures love in faith.

The little yellow bird that Kabi saw on the hedge continued to set a dark green and wet fence ablaze with its singing peace. It was happy with the sun whose rays brought a promise of rain to the whole country and with the rain the return of the night - bird's song. Falls the rain with the song of life.

Kabi pulled her wine-red cardigan closer to her body. She buttoned it from the bottom up. She was back leaning her elbows on the ledge looking through the window to the hedge. The rays of the sun made the dark green leaves bright. They pierce through the morning dew. It shines like a glossy rich green coating of life. The leaves sparkle. Kabi says to herself, 'there is the joy of life. There it is and it is tangible and inaudible'. She looked more keenly and saw that the leaves and branches swang ever so gently in the freshness of hardly perceptible breeze. She also saw the short and thick brown stump of a tree, deeply rooted in the ground. She added, 'There is strength in that little shoot coming out of a stump of a tree. Green and leafy already! A shoot!' It was as if a large curtain had been drawn for her to see everything.

Kabi could continue to watch this morning that greeted her and carried her to a world of poetry. But first, there was breakfast. The boys were coming back early that morning. Peter was still asleep. Ariani had fallen ill. Kabi moved here and there to get the cups, saucers, bread and butter. In a few minutes breakfast was on the table. When she glanced outside again the little bird's song was back. Cheery and full of light. She walked to the window for a minute.

A dream she had that night crept back. Train. She was on a train but this time, she was the train driver. Her children were part of the train crew. She remembered the start and stop screeches sounding, as the kettle whistled in the morning. She laughed at herself thinking she was far too serious about life. She recalled her passenger list and the very familiar sound... *chu... chu... chu... chu... chu*. She in a stroke of a woman's fury made that long list. No classes. No First Class. No Second Class. No Third Class on her train. Not even listing of names in alphabetical order. Numbers even and odd mixed at different times in different places to infinity were her way.

In that dream, she sang to the train as it sped on towards the sea. She remembered too the beautiful blue mass of water that kissed Mombasa. The Ocean from far was like a wide skirt that embraced the shores of the city like a waist and spread out far. It dominated the horizon before swallowing the blessing of a brilliant orange rising sun.

She laughed out loud as she walked back to the kitchen. She switched off the kettle. She thought of the times she had witnessed the sun unable to pierce the dark clouds for their thickness. The sun seemed to return afresh daily with the dawn as if to confess that for all its might and power it must follow its path of love, sweeping the sky for the moon and other stars. But it was always there. In the end what are dark clouds but rain? Kabi's heart is young and tender. Kabi feels so fresh and gentle. She wants to bellow a message for all. The sun's rays disappear and reappear outside, to pierce the dew with light all over again; and to make the leaves glow greenly. It made them grow too, fall and die giving life. The boys were round the corner.

Joe had to be the first one Kabi hugged tightly when the boys came home. He was the son that she worried most about.

Joe immediately sensed that something was different this morning. He could feel his Mum's heart was bubbling with life. Kabi looked at him intensely. She played with him later. When the boys awoke in the afternoon they found their 'Mami' looking deeply refreshed and jovial. They asked after Ariani.

"Ariani is sick," Kabi said.

"Aaah!" said Amani.

They wrapped up two winnowing trays made of soft banana fiber, one for Ariani and one for Rehema. On the trays, two loaves of bread, milk, a bottle of honey and some fruits. Amani carried one and Jugus the other. They knocked at Rehema's door. Rehema stepped out and received her set with delight. In Ariani's house some children were busy peeling potatoes for supper. She was in bed but smiled when the boys stood before her singing Joe's favorite verse.

“Baby Yesu param mpapampam, I am a poor boy too param mpapampam, I have no gift to bring param mpapampam that’s fit to give a queen.”

That evening, Atia phoned to announce their return from Mauritius. There were two exciting days for the two families to enjoy together. Atia eagerly heard Wam’s story. He was delighted.

Before Kabi and the boys left Nairobi by train on the afternoon after the return of Atia they visited Banana Hill. Wakabi hardly moved these days. She sat and knitted with many different colors. Wa Ngai only drank water.

Wind through branches

The dawn was a cluster of dark clouds tinged with orange where the tips of the sunrays touched cloudy darkness as the bus left Nairobi. After some time, the center of the clouds was black but their edges were a deep pink. It was fascinating to look up to the sky.

Kabi wished Wam was there to see this harmony and beauty. Wam was busy. Her study on sexuality in traditional and modern times was absorbing. Her findings on sex for better grades in all sectors of education right from upper primary when girls saw their little breasts out, secondary schools to colleges and the University was published. She kept asking, 'How could teachers instruct in sex education if this is how some of them behaved?'

At her own school Kabi kept a keen eye on everything that happened. The cool wind blew through the branches of the tall bushy tree beside the classroom where Kabi was teaching poetry. Her voice was smooth and powerful as it rolled words that she read from her heart. Spontaneously, a voice rose from the back of the classroom introducing another poem and beginning to read. Kabi sat down and listened to all... including powerful claps. Words from different parts of the world were delightful.

The green speckled leaves of the orange Nandi Flame tree danced and swayed in the sun. The perfect breezy coolness and warmth enveloped Kabi at school and at home. The gray clouds were driven off. The beautiful weather continued to reign from the blue sky dotted with a cloud here and there. It was ambitious to want to teach a vision of life. But Kabi's dream was forever.

Hemmed in by a syllabus that had to be followed, her dream still survived. She broke bounds. She went out in search of knowledge beyond the approved books, more books, more ideas. She broke her heart into rivulets of friendship that she allowed to flow to everyone. She longed to be the source of the flooding water of a Kĩrũirũ that

would be immense like the Nile. She wanted to be a flood of goodness and wisdom, not of misery. She wanted to be a river that would in its murmur carry Googo's prayer and power to every heart, in every corner of a continent, so bright.

Students always went to her desk when her lessons were over. Sometimes it was their mothers or both parents coercing them out of 'love' to get married as they were strained by paying school fees having sold their last goat. Some wanted to know about more exciting books to read. Many wanted to show her their new poems. Others just wanted to be seen near her. There were a few who asked her for private time and shared their pains with her. Sometimes it was girls saying their fathers wanted them to get circumcised. One orphan boy wanted Kabi to explain why being without parents was his fate. He said it was hard for him to accept love.

Sometimes it was a girl whose father wanted her to marry his best friend, and she was afraid. The chapters could get darker. There was the girl who was sure that she was unloved because of her own language, her roots. She came from a small community of cattle herders. Kabi loved her. She encouraged her with kind words and smiles. She told her to see how her marks were improving. And so often girls wanted help with boys who wanted to sleep with them during the holidays.

Behind Kabi's back some students fantasized on her second wedding. They nicknamed her Mrs. Lear. All teachers had nicknames but they did not know them.

All the students left. From where she sat, Kabi could see the crowns of all the trees. She couldn't see the trunks. The roots were thrust deep down. They pushed below into the brown soil. She wondered what being in a classroom meant to most people. Was it a chance to search for roots or to forget them? Was this really education?

A sudden wind blows. It changes her thoughts. The night - bird so loved Wakabi and her children. It suffered with them. It laughed with them. Wakabi had said no to genital cutting for her girls. Kabi

taught both students and parents the same thing. She told them about her mother.

The lion anywhere looks at its own with pride. The palm swallow bird makes beautiful nests with clay and grass. And no matter how high it flies, it remembers that to catch worms and swoop back to its young in the nest is a must. The eagle knows for all its might and focus, it must not leave its young untrained on how to hunt for chicken. Kabi wanted her students to fly on the wings of humanity. She desired to take them where motivation beckons ambition after the fight and without flight.

In the distance, she could hear the bird's song. Its voice came from the deep places where plant met plant and leaf touched leaf. Somewhere immersed in the fallen leaves the bird must have found its night. The kiss of the night - bird came back to her with all its warmth. Kabi spent much time reading and meditating. She felt the recesses of her soul. She was pregnant with happiness. Compassion filled her brimless soul. The day was exceptionally bright. It was framed with beautiful clear blue skies. The hills were the backdrop of rich green trees here.

Early that morning, Sayari alighted from a bus in Arusha. She was doing her research on Ubuntu philosophy. Kabi was interested to hear about her findings. Both were enjoying the beauty of engaging work.

Sayari reminded Kabi of her love for Professor Rubadiri's classes almost ten years ago. Then it was as if his class was the Othello drama with everyone on stage. She was watching it all through her own eyes and taking part. It was as if while Rubadiri taught, she was shaking hands with Desdemona and hearing Iago. The world was a stage for her and the other students. In those days, she was so lost in wonder when she sat and read on the grass outside in the afternoons. It was only that sometimes a real Afrikan thunderstorm would jolt her to her feet and she would run helter skelter just like in Rubadiri's poem, *An Afrikan Thunderstorm*. Then she held her skirt down and ran. She stood. The wind still filled it and it threatened to blow out

like an umbrella. She stood legs together. Each foot to the opposite direction but both joined at the heels became the crook handle of her umbrella planted in the ground.

At University, Kabi had stood her ground in many ways. She refused to attend any student meetings called on the basis of districts and tribe. She had turned down many young men who suggested a quick-quack to her simply because they came from the same region as she and spoke the same mother tongue. Such hot proposals made after meetings in which the unspoken words were that women were bodies for sexual experiments she rejected.

Evening came after school and a tired but happy Kabi was set to go home. When she was there, Jugus asked interesting questions and there was no rest. In public, he was shy but at home he was quite ebullient.

He came home from school in a jovial mood. "Mum," he said, "I got a good clap in the debate today."

"Why, what did you say?" she asked.

"I opposed the motion. It was: 'There is no need for a free press in Kenya'." Kabi was excited to hear that. She knew a time would come when Jugus would do something and not just say these things.

"Do you believe in what you said?"

"Yes. I know in a debate one can argue for what one does not believe, but not me!"

"Why a free media?"

"Well, you see, free here is certainly not that one is not paying. It is free in the sense that we can say what we want to say!"

"Do you know how many people in the world have been in prison for saying what governments do not like to hear?"

"Yes, we keep a list of those people. And the name of the president of the time is listed beside them!"

"Why?"

"We learn about freedom in leadership. We like to know life from the point of the lowest and the highest leaf on a tree we say at school!"

“Well. Good. But you pledge loyalty to the government in school, you know what that means?”

“You mean at Assembly? I do not pledge Mum. I do not. I just do not like the sound of it. I prefer action. The national anthem is enough.”

“That is called sedition here!”

Mother and son looked fiercely into each other’s eyes. They did not smile. It was amazing how the suppression of free speech and press had turned classrooms into seedbeds of revolt.

The sun of our Life

It was the third week in the last month of the school term. Staff were chatting in the morning over a cup of tea. Kabi was still on her way in. She was later driving to visit Amani at Shinda Boarding School after a few hours at her own school. The other teachers spoke about her.

“Kabi seems to be very lively these days. The boys really enjoy her lessons,” said Cheps. The other teachers nodded in agreement.

“She is so alive and energetic, even on Mondays,” said Mrs. Anyumba. “She is a different person since her Christmas holiday.”

“Has she fallen in love?” wondered Miss Nanjala.

“Well, it seems you do not know her. Don’t you remember that she is the only one who answered Moi when his vehicle stopped by our students who lined up the road for him? Have you forgotten how she surprised him with her ready and courageous answers when not one of us dared open our mouths? How she told him we were going to study and how she refused to take his money for fuel?”

“I saw that man called Eitshoo panic! His assistant! But for Kabi it was as if nothing was going on.”

Just then Kabi walked into the office greeting everyone cheerfully.

“Hey, tell us how you are handling your class,” said Cheps. “They are so different and happy, all of them, both boys and girls!”

“Not handling... they are my friends. I know my nickname! I hear them say it but know they must do such things. I am not a god before them... I remember my Mother in my class. She was Mother of all us.”

“Oh, come on... not all of us could have our mothers teaching us!”

“I know. We have exciting debates. I credit them when they see my mistakes. Really, the only magic is to know how they feel and to

show that it matters. Nothing else. Maybe we should ask the students what they think!”

“In my class girls just do not talk!” said Mrs. Anyumba. “I ask them if they cannot see I have a mouth, I am a woman and am talking!”

“Mhhh, that sounds rather... like an insult, I think!” Said Nanjala

“And the boys sleep!” Anyumba said

“So you teach the walls?” asked Nanjala.

“Mhhhh!” said Kabi, adding that boys took up challenging thoughts very keenly, and the girls were offering those all the time in her class.

“Great!” added Nanjala. “But what makes them even come up to you with personal problems. I know some of us do too... but students?”

“I guess they are just like all of us. Now come on, friends, don’t make me a god! I am glad we are women who can bring up so many boys and girls!”

“Well, next term we start with a week of staff only sharing ideas!” said Cheps.

“Yesss!” shouted Nanjala.

Soon some of the teachers settled to work. Kabi silently read Dr King’s speech, *I have a Dream*, as she waited to teach her last class before leaving to visit Amani. She could hear Nanjala and her friends discussing taking up the challenge. They had to fit in standards of teaching that were improving fast. Indeed some of the teachers who never prepared their work and gossiped a lot held their cheeks between the palms of their hands. Kabi knew they were the same ones who usually complained of the boys only wanting to play and not to learn.

It was end of term. Everyone felt tired. As usual exam fever rose everywhere. In good schools, the three months were like running many hundreds of meters only to finish with a sprint. Teachers worked intensely in marking exams for which students held study marathons.

Kabi was not as pleased with her students as other teachers seemed to imagine; she wanted them to excel. She was prudent enough not to discuss their weak points with everyone. She showed students how strong they were and how much stronger they could become. She fully believed that negative thought caused poor results.

Relations between students and teachers were fragile and she did not want to make them more difficult than they already were. She was convinced that students were leaders. She often wondered if school systems should not have been changed completely so that students taught themselves more. The most difficult years of leading one's life, she thought, were actually at school. The years when one did not know just what writing a good essay or being diligent in sciences and all subjects could mean to the world. The years when one worked many hours and paid for it, those were the real times of leadership. No limelight, no fuss, just work. Sunrise. Sunset. A lesson to all politicians here went unlearned as they sought press just to make a little noise and then mostly sleep and dishonor the House of the People, as Kabi called it. The House of Parliament.

That afternoon, Kabi got concerned that her class was rather dull. The students, she later discovered, had fought over a silly argument. The intolerant Agriculture teacher, Mrs. Anyumba, had severely punished them crushing their morale before nastily wishing them a happy Easter! She was a stern woman.

Shinda School parents' day

As Kabi drove across the Moi's Bridge that morning, she noticed the turbulent brown dirty waters flowing towards the east. The bridge was not a high one. It was almost broken in the middle just like when it was called Hoey's Bridge, like the little township. They crossed it safely. She was driving the green farm pick-up, and Joe and Jugus accompanied her. They spoke excitedly about the forthcoming holidays. Jugus read a little and soon they were there.

Amani came running out excitedly and hugged his Mum first and then Jugus and Joe. He soon introduced his new friend Tuva. "This is my friend Tuva from Nairobi. His parents aren't coming Mum, he won a prize for the best science project on beekeeping," he gasped. "This one, here," he said, pulling another boy who stood behind him like a shadow, "He shared with me the poetry prize!"

Amani did not like poetry although he knew his mother loved it. He had won prizes for Math, physics and chemistry. He wanted to study Medicine. He was working hard for it. He went on to explain that Tuva was a good friend of his. Tuva was sponsored by a company in Nairobi because he was amongst the best boys overall in Nairobi Province. He said he'd share everything with him knowing that this would please his mother.

The sun shone brightly but it was not too hot. Parents, some grandparents and many children sat in an open space. Shinda School did not yet have a hall big enough to take all.

Here the neat boys sat on their own benches on the side opposite the visitors. Separating the two was a table piled with trophies and books. The staff sat on two benches behind the table. The Headmistress read a beautiful speech.

She praised the teachers saying that the improved standards of the school were equal to the role the teachers had played. She was happy with the school's performance in national examinations. Prize

- giving moment came and the boys were truly excited. They clapped eagerly for each winner.

Kabi saw nothing else except a close up vision of Amani as he walked up for his prizes. Jugus was elated. Joe jumped up and down and clapped endlessly. There was a thunderous clap for Tuva who won the school trophy for the best boy overall. The concert that followed opened with the poem of the year recited by its writer. Tuva paused and announced:

Hakuna Matata

Mtetemeko wa ardhi umepita

Hakuna matata

Ulidhani ulimwengu ni vile vile

Hakuna matata

Mpaka siku ikafika ukajionea

Hakuna matata

Mambo hupinduka, hupinduka mambo

Shida ikawa Shinda; Hakuna matata

Sisi twashinda, twashinda bila shaka

Hakuna. Hakuna maatata.

Mi nachagua nchi yangu, isiwe na matata

Shida si ndwele buja ikawa shinda

Hakuna mataataaaa!

After the poem, the boys jumped into a frenzied traditional dance. Soon the entertainment show was over. From the crowd of students Tuva emerged with Amani. Kabi was thoughtful for a while.

“Would you be allowed to come over for holidays with the boys by your parents?” She asked Tuva

“Well, I think so, but first I would like to go home and see my brothers and sisters.”

Tuva explained that his mother was in Kenyatta Hospital. She was going to have an operation. Kabi noted the boy's maturity and concern for his family.

"In which part of the city do you live?" She asked.

"Mhh, well I don't really know, where, you see, our family settled in Kenyalini after Muoroto Village was demolished. I don't know if we have a new shack back in that old place. If not, then I'm sure our family moved to Mathare, Kibera or maybe to Kayole and..." Tuva was trying to make something of an explanation out of the jigsaw puzzle that had landed him in a new school supported by a bursary from Sr. Atieno. It was two terms since Amani had joined Shinda Boarding School. He needed to make good friends.

"Well, well, don't worry. Maybe we can arrange something," Kabi said quickly. Tuva would never know what memories he had revived.

"How are you my dear?" He drawled in his Washington accent.

Kabi had heard that voice once before. It was the man named Eitshooo who stood beside Kabi. Kabi did not answer. She as if by chance turned around and sneezed. "Atchoooo! Atchooo! Atchooo!"

"Good afternoon! ...Eitshooo!"

Seeing to an abrupt end of the conversation, Kabi got into her pick-up. A flash of how Eitshooo had tried to bully her, forcing his way into her life on Parents' Day the year before made her angry. She disliked him for quickly 'my dearing' her. How could he have thought of that?" Like a flash of lightning he had words flow out of his mouth. He had promised her a limousine, a mansion, properties in the city, settling down in United States of America... anything if that night she would go home with him. He called it love. Kabi was shocked to hear him say that he would die if she said no. She said no and here he was still, alive and bullying. He now went away surly. Kabi continued to eat with her children and Tuva.

Amani was left behind for the last week of term. He would travel home by himself. He knew that Mum would make sure that Tuva visited over the holiday either this time or the next.

The journey back from Shinda was quiet. The boys were tired and Kabi mused on her sons' future as she drove through the dusty road. Between the trees after Eldoret town, she caught glimpses of the setting sun falling into thin wattle trees. It was a big golden ball surrounded by a yellow shiny sky. She thought about the golden aura that surrounds the sun. Sunsets dazzled her in the softening afternoon. It was as if she was traveling to beyond the tarmac road. She remembered many things. That golden light there was not just dust shot through by rays of the sun as Fatha used to say. It was a masterpiece of nature. This was not as simple as the priest had put it. He said "That humans were nothing but tiny specks of dust illuminated by powerful sun rays." Kabi asked him if humans did not also give light. He did not answer. Kabi suspected there was something more to it.

The boys were fast asleep in the van. She looked at them and was happy. Kabi felt that every part of a human being was more precious than gold. She took a deep breath. She was filled with serenity as she remembered Amani her son. As for Tuva and the memories he evoked in her, her heart ached. She dreamed of making his star shine even brighter. Just then one of the boys farted so loud she could hardly believe it. The other one followed suit. They both woke up laughing. She lowered her window.

Nairobi to stay

As the bus sped down the Kitale-Eldoret road and Kabi saw the same wattle trees passing in quick succession, she could hardly believe she was on her way to Nairobi again; and this time for good. She knew the wattle trees or the green acacia were not indigenous. She thought about it. Instead of the Aborigines visiting Kenya, it was the trees that were brought all the way from Australia and planted here.

The morning was fresh and dewy. The sun had risen but it was not fully visible. The two boys looked through the windows tried to count the trees. As the bus rolled on its wheels, the trees seemed to be moving. It was like playing hide and seek with the trees. They could hardly count the trees. Later they counted the donkeys they could see on the road. They loved doing that.

‘Yes, it’s for good for me,’ Kabi tried to convince herself. The only consolation was an occasional return to the farm in Kitale where Aris was coming to settle down with Jwak. Kabi was leaving for good.

Kabi’s mind drifted back to the farewell party for her at school. All along that final week, the sadness of the students dampened her heart. Kabi was leaving. They loved her. Besides, she helped them in motherly ways. Their consolation was that they too would leave school in time. Some of them wondered who they would confide in and they worried about who would counsel them the way Kabi had done.

Many students wished that it was Miss Nanjala who was leaving them. It was in vain. Nanjala is the one who bought many sodas for them to drink at Kabi’s farewell party. The students thought to plan a protest to the Education office in town, but they did not want Kabi to be arrested. She shed tears when she heard about the student’s plan.

Everything had moved to their flat near the city center in Nairobi South B. Things had happened so fast that none had really had too much time to worry. Joe and Jugus were already accepted in Red Nandi Flame School, where their cousins and friends were.

Atia was having a hard time. His son, Ani, was very sick in hospital. Adau survived a stroke and as if to make it worse, Atia's own art and architecture company, in which his wife worked was failing. When Kabi received an acceptance to teach in a Harambee School in Nairobi she took the chance for the sake of Atia. She had no idea then, that many other people would need her in Nairobi. Amani would continue quite happily in Shinda School.

Kabi was not surprised by student behavior in Nairobi. She remembered her own days. But now students spoke out more. Often they had discipline problems. It was not like in her days in Kaza. Here, it was different. There were many problems. Many students lived with their grandparents.

'Aids had come to take all people, to harvest them,' it was said. HIV-Aids. The people said it was a plague sent to finish black people. The origins of Aids remained a mystery. The President said that people who had it should be sent off to an island to live in isolation.

Many parents were not interested in school affairs. Guardians were trying to help their children, but many failed and who was Kabi to appeal to for help? Discipline would never suffice. She tried her best to love all her students. She knew how much they needed love. She called it the basic cell of prosperity.

She refused a frequent offer to work for a parastatal advanced to her by Eitshoooo, the man from 'Washington'. He traced her every move. Kabi shuddered thinking of it. Eitshooo had two wives. Kabi spent her weekends with Atia. She knew the pain of death and understood her sister-in-law very much when the 'sad' moment came for all. Ani died well comforted. He was in the wonderful care of his parents and doctors. The Red Nandi Flame School Community gave

their support. All agreed that with so much suffering- he had leukemia- the boy would be playing in a better world.

The Atias were piecing life together again. Adau was better after some treatment but the gap Ani left none could fill. Kabi knew this journey so well. The empty echo of Ani's absence was deeply felt. Kabi became the couple's consoler.

Kabi found herself in Kenyalini Village again. She went there during weekends of the term. She smiled wondering if she had become pregnant with Kenyalini Village for life. Although she was looking after Atia's children, as he and Adau were away, Kabi decided to talk to Sista Jiru, to find out how life went on there. She found Sista still at work. Sista told her that Googo had been promoted to glory. Kabi, found Tuva's home. She made plans to adopt Tuva's little sister. Their mother had TB. Kabi loved children more than Tuva could imagine and her plans were bound to succeed.

Free verse

Times were trying for Kabi. She had not expected complete rejection by students. She could not imagine failing as a teacher. She kept trying her best.

“Free verse means the poem is written without taking too much care of rhyme because it has music in it,” Kabi went on.

“Excuse me Madam,” said Hamisi. “We don’t understand.”

“And we don’t like poetry,” Auma finished curtly as if to hammer in something that could not be undone. The noise in the classroom rose like mercury in a thermometer steeped in sudden heat. And soon no one could hear anything. All students were only saying what they did not like.

“Quiet everyone!” Said Kabi. “Hamisi, say, I don’t understand. Auma, say you don’t like poetry. The others can speak for themselves.”

“Fine, thank you, teacher,” said Hamisi. Kabi disliked this formality. It was almost like starch in school uniform.

“I don’t understand,” Hamisi went on. “Doesn’t free mean not sold? Then free verse means poems you cannot sell like maize in a market?” The whole class laughed.

Kabi smiled as she let the students laugh for a while. She was very calm. Then she spoke so softly they all cocked their ears to hear her. She answered his question as if it was the most important thing she had ever spoken about.

“Hamisi. The word ‘free’ yes means you do not buy, free like... like air. You can breathe free of charge. It does mean you do not have to pay. However, it also means that the end of the lines in poems do not have to rhyme. A free way of writing poems.”

“Yes. Fine thank you, teacher Kabi.”

“Hamisi, you may just say ‘yes’ to mean you understand. You do not need to say fine and to thank me all the time. You do not need to call me ‘teacher’ all the time. Feel free.”

“Yes!” Hamisi shouted. He gave her a thumbs up beaming with joy.

Hamisi looked thrilled. He shook his head in agreement. The class was silent.

“Let me give you an example of a verse that is not free. You see, if you have ‘n-d’ like in ‘end’, you have to have another ‘n-d’ like in ‘send, after some lines. Like this.

Mother is going to lend
All that is free here
And granny is going to send
All that grows in a year
Until the very end!

“Oh, yes!” said Hamisi. “Lend, send, end... rhymes. ‘Here’ and ‘year’ too. Those lines are not free but I love them all the same!”

Hamisi went on:

Mwana mbuzi mee
Amlia mvana wee
Amamwbia kwea
Kwea mlima wa mawe!

The class was over. The Atias were back and life seemed to be running smoothly. This allowed Kabi time to work and concentrate on making friends with her new students. They were poor. Some did not eat anything until evening. She noticed that many of them were failing to come to school. Tuva’s story from his days in the slums to success inspired her new students. She told them about his mother and their life in Muoroto as well as Shinda School. She did this with the art of one who knows how to spice a meal. In the end all the students were smiling. Chiriri and her group of friends who used to skip school together dropped the habit. Kabi became the topic of

conversations in many homes. Chiriri's father used to sing as he staggered home drunk.

"Mwalimu, mzuri, mpenda watu... wanafunzi, eh! eh! eh!" O good teach love *sukulu!* he would sing. In these days, Kabi noticed she rarely heard birds singing. The sound of traffic was endless.

But the traffic noise was not as bad as the chaos of riots. There was no peace and unity and love was even more distant in many places. Every time the President gave a speech, he said that the cup of peace, love and unity was overflowing on their island of peace.

But slowly and as if in the way a thunderstorm, tension was high in Nairobi. The Kamkunji grounds were to be the venue of a meeting calling for a multi- party system. The organizers had planned it for the 7th of July, or Saba Saba meaning the Seventh day of the Seventh month. There was great anticipation. The meeting was cancelled. It was declared illegal. There were many soldiers on the streets but nobody felt safe. There was the feeling of great oppression in the air.

Police and army camped everywhere. Children from Eastlands could not go to school that Monday. Saba Saba. The children from the West were in school as usual up to the late afternoon. On Wednesday the 9th of July, tension had reached its zenith. At Red Nandi Flame School, the pupils were jittery but they had to stay on by order of the Headmaster.

Kabi continued going to school as usual leaving very early in the mornings to avoid getting caught up. She was taking a risk. Then, the smell of burning filled the air. The palm trees on Kenyatta Avenue were ablaze. All their dry fronds burnt to ashes. They were rescued in the last minute by a functional water brigade lorry this time. That was a bad omen; palm trees of peace were set on fire on Uhuru Highway too. Where would peace wait to invade the city again? Kabi saw a Kenya Bus on fire. This sight disturbed her. The burning palm trees were seared in her memory.

Indeed people were heard to say often in different languages, that palm trees on fire was a bad sign. If this was a symbol of things to come the future was bleak. *Matatus* were reversing in the middle of

Moi Avenue because there were people hurling big stones from the sidewalks and blocking the roads.

Uhuru Highway was impassable. Kangemi, Uthiru were in violence. The Cockerel Jogoo Road was blocked. Eastlands was burning. Kabi feared, as did others. Innocent people died like flies.

It was Wednesday in Kabi's social ethics class. This time after her talk, Hamisi spoke up. "Teacher Kabi, what can we do for Kime's family? His father is dead. Kime cannot speak. That is why Kime left school in the afternoon."

"Yes, yes we will have to see what we can do. I want you all to take great care and go home quietly and quickly after assembly," She said.

The assembly took three minutes. It was like a solemn court. School closed. The headmaster announced that the students were to return to their homes, stay indoors and keep safe. Kabi's heart beat fast when she saw dead bodies in the city.

Kabi began to find herself humming often. It was to keep off a certain familiar numbness that was beginning to creep into her heart. Tension grew higher. It was like a mountain. A mountain of grief not green leaves. A mount Kenya abused and oozing pain sat rooted on Moi Avenue in the middle of the city.

People did not leave their homes to go to work. It was mid-month. They kept close to their radios. Those who had TVs at home watched their screens nervously. Terror was sowing alarm everywhere. But people who lived in the slums did not grow weaker. Defiance and resilience united their spirit. They were ready for anything.

Atia's phone rang. Wam had arrived two weeks before. She was at a friend's house for a week. She had tried to leave Thika to get back to Nairobi. She was talking very fast.

"We cannot forget them!" Wam sobbed. Youth had braced themselves and come out in a big demonstration. She found herself in the middle of them. Then there was a stampede. She saw many people mowed down by shooting. She escaped a volley of gunfire by

a whisker. She was back in the house and frantically rang Atia who had just arrived back in the city. He avoided the city center.

Atia drove fast through tiny roads surrounding Karura Forest area. He went through Kiambu. Corpses on the road to Kirigiti stadium lay on the pavements. People were rushing shouting. He saw someone waving both arms to stop him. He recognized his cousin Mui. He slowed down the car and without turning his neck opened the lock behind him. Atia's eyes were steadily watching through the rear mirror. The man jumped in and closed the door fast. He took off with speed eyes focused ahead. He was happy to have company to drive towards Thika but he could hardly express that.

"We are making funeral arrangements for our footballer; that's why we had to come to Nairobi to place radio announcements. My friend Wai did not know that the war had been brought to our doorsteps from the city to our village. We did not know they would shoot us dead. What government should do that? What have we done wrong? Wai stepped out to buy some milk. The houses are very close to the kiosks. He did not go far. I saw him through my window as we are neighbors. I saw him fall. I ran out towards him. I took him. I shook him. I shouted, 'Let's go!' I held him to my chest. Then I saw a mess of blood streaming from his stomach. It was on that spot outside Corner Bar. He had been shot dead. Wai was dying, he died in my arms! The bullets were not fired into the air! That is a lie! I am lucky to be alive. But I should have died. I should have died, No, not Wai... no!"

But more deaths were reported. An old man coming from the District Hospital for treatment, children going to school, women going to till the land were shot dead.

It took long to calm Wam down. Cousin Mui had to forget his own pains. Wam was hysterical. A heavy cloud hung over the country. Atia and his wife mourned their son again. New deaths brought back past deaths painfully. They pointed to future deaths.

A football player is buried

Waina's funeral was extraordinary. It was organized to show defiance. His the team carried his casket shoulder high for four kilometers to the cemetery near Iara church. They sang protest songs. Police tried to disperse them. A ring of men joined at the elbows kept police out.

They reached the village cemetery. Each time the pastor asked for the casket to be lowered into the ground, the football team, now protesters, took it up again on their shoulders and yelled: *Noo! Notukahotana!* No! We shall overcome!

Others cut branches from nearby bushes and threw them into the hole. The police left. A few young men stayed near the road smoking strong smelling homemade cigarettes. They swore to never again buy cigarettes from shops but to always smoke their home made stuff. They drowned all their pain in dirges. They did not feel the night-bird's constant kiss on their foreheads.

None of them heard the song of the night - bird that sang at three in the afternoon deep in the rushes near the river. Maybe Wai did, who could tell?

Kabi was swallowed by her writing. She was quiet and meditative. She was in that meeting place of the heart and mind. She had seen a chopper swooping and hovering around Matiba- Rubia Road. It was as if it was chasing an eagle that descended fast from the sky and hid with a squirrel. It was scaring how the plane came so close to the ground. Matiba and Rubia were arrested in a black vehicle which came just as the plane flew higher up. They were incarcerated for leading the Kamkunji meetings on Saba Saba Day. Kabi wrote:

“An eagle is not white and a squirrel is not black. The British rule gone? Freedom. Always shades of color, shades of meaning and colors of change. I think about the future for children. Is this the freedom we fought for? What was the freedom we had before colonialism?”

At that moment, Kabi realized there was tension in the house. Joe and Jugus were in a heated discussion. In serious tones they spoke about policies and politics.

“Why do you think Mandela refused to leave his plane when he passed through Nairobi?” Joe asked.

“A lesson for our consciences,” said Jugus “We have to be courageous!”

Jugus knew more about courage than his mother thought. He had found a page in her papers. He had read it and so fully engrossed was he that he did not hear anything else for hours.

“The Mothers at Freedom Corner, they want their sons back. They have been on hunger strike; he would not heed their call; the President would not. The mothers at Freedom Corner know only one thing – that their children must be free. They will only speak the language of freedom.

The mothers at Freedom Corner had done everything but no-one heard them. The Mothers at Freedom Corner were pelted with hard

jets of water as they hid in the church. The mothers at Freedom Corner being delivered of baby freedom in endless birthpangs. The hours of labor turned into a year. At that time other people died in slum fires. They said it was because there was no fire brigade to quell the fire. But there was a firefighter. The police were using it to silence mothers dying for freedom for their children.” That is what Kabi had written and Jugus read. Kabi stood before her sons now.

“Jugus!” said Kabi taking him by surprise.

“What, Mum?” he asked eagerly.

“I am going into politics. I want to work. I will look for votes. I will go to Parliament.”

Jugus turned his tightly shut lips outwards at the edges, letting them extend almost down to his chin. But it was Joe who spoke first.

“No. Mum. No! That is a big mistake... going to Parliament does not change anything. It is the people that must change. I mean it! You will be good, they will kill you! Politics in our country kills people!”

“In other countries too, but it is politicians who kill. Not politics. This should not always be so!”

“No! they killed Dad.”

“Haaah? Come here darling...” Kabi asked with a rising voice. She hugged Joe.

“Yes, I know, Mum. You love us. You love people. That is why we have Tuva... Mum, public life is dangerous. Remember how that minister died in February? Remember the bishop...Muuu? Muge?” Added Jugus.

“Jugus, we cannot bury our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich. I see things, even here in the city, I see things I can change or at least help change. Shall I say no? I cannot ignore the hawkers, the small business people,” She said. “They need strong women who have braved all seasons to defend them.”

“Yes, they need women. Not you!” Said Joe. Nobody spoke.

For the first time in his life, Jugus paced up and down like an old man. In an instant, it was as if he saw something. His face changed and beamed.

“Yes, Mum. Go for it! We’ll tell the whole family!” We’ll support you always in all your plans! Hakuna matata!”

Kabi smiled. And yet. The two were silent for a while. Mother and son stared beyond the stars. The sun and moon were dancing right in their eyes. In their trance, Kabi saw Googo of Kenyalini Village return with a small lantern called *koroboi* in her hand. She gave it to Kabi. Kabi took it. She spoke to her: “Eh Jamuge!” She said.

Kabi answered, “Missssing!”

It was she indeed who was speaking. Then Googo fell into contemplation again. She was praying for Kabi and the country. She was asking for wisdom for Kabi, peace and prosperity. Googo had pushed her spirit in prayer to the highest altar of her own soul. Googo had reached frontiers that anointed men never would reach even in a high mass. Kabi heard the distant river humming its song again. Somewhere in the distance too, the song of the night - bird could be heard. Suddenly coming to herself she looked at Jugus who, like his mother, was also far away.

As if in a dream, Jugus saw a truck on the road. He and his mother were in a pick-up van. They were on the Kitale-Eldoret road. The trailer swerved right into the middle of the road just as a green pick-up was about to overtake it. It was Eitshoo! Beside him sat Timo looking old and sick. The pick-up van blew up into pieces while the man with the accent just toughened a hard grin. Jugus still in his ‘dream’, stood up beside his Mother and said,

“Cheers to all! Cheers to Mum! All the support she needs is here!” He said as he flexed his right arm muscles playfully and sat down! At that point Googo vanished with the speed of lightning. When Kabi looked up, Googo was sitting on the sun and looking down smiling. She was not burning. The moon was there to cool her feet. Everything whirled in cool control out there in the skies. Stars

shone. Planets danced to a unique rhythm. The earth was saying it is the sun that must dance around it for all peoples to greet Googo.

A knock at the door shook them back to reality. Atia looking bent and tired entered in. He hugged his sister tightly and silently. The children looked at him knowing he had something sad to say. His eyes were very red. He started to cry. Jugus stared into his tears. He saw how they fell and rolled down his cheeks. Joe and Amani saw themselves in his tears. Finally he spoke.

“I could not ring you about this. We had to meet and talk.” That is all everyone heard. The night was long and dark. The next day’s headlines screamed: Genocide in Rwanda. And the TV screens were filled with the horrors of machete deaths. Butchers? It shocked the world, they said. Each one understood at their own time and tears run down all the faces.

Jugus is a senior boss in an International Leadership Company based in Nairobi. He sat in his living room reading. He relished his Mum's conviction. In every word he read, her ideals transpired. She had written her personal manifesto:

"I want to be focused. I wish to be unified with all the noble ideals of the human race. I reject evil and error. I reject division. I reject corruption. I reject violence. It is despicable. I wish to look for truth. Goodness. I see them in my eyes beyond the sunset. They rise with the sun and never set. With the moon and never set. I have to try and match my work with this. We have new tools. We must unite, not just communicate. I will work for justice, unity and peace."

"I wish not to hide. I want meetings, national dialogue, communication, voices, debates. Free speech. Free songs. Let us infuse Googo's traditional wisdom into political science. It can be done. The growth of the economy is key. If we fail in this, we shall be manipulated through modern and highly sophisticated means of social communication by the powers of this world."

"Economic growth is about our development in hope and love too. The song of the night - bird whose secret I know since I was small will be silenced forever if we do not act. Tuva's motto, *Hakuna matata* will be destroyed. I cannot let that happen. Life will die in trees and in rivers forever if I do not act."

Jugus was breathless as he thought of terrorism in the world.

On another page headed 'June 1990, a talk to students' he read: "Then what is special about humans? Is it their intelligence and freedom, their ability to hope, to learn from nature? Why so much discrimination? Racism? Tribalism? Destruction?" Jugus went on and smiled knowingly as he read Tuva's poem.

*Duty skillfully fulfilled
Rewards entirely
Making up for
What's sorry in us
Only they who try
are brave and
Can forever sing
Relentlessly courageous
The song of humanity
fearless*

The phone rang. It was Amani's distinct voice.

"Hi Amani! How's varsity? When is your graduation?" Jugus asked.

"I say, before we go on, please congratulate Tuva for unraveling the causes of those two most mysterious deaths of Bob Ouko and Bishop Kip. These are crimes that beat Scotland Yard and FBI you know!"

"Sure! I'll call him, Amani, I will. Today, not tomorrow, I will call him."

"This gift derived from our Mother drives us. She is gone but she is here. Before her it was in all our grandmothers! I am still reading her diary. Great! We owe her everything!"

Amani who was about to graduate with a PhD in medicine was emotional. "My long study on the mutation of the Human Immunodeficiency Syndrome will be published in the Lancet next week! We are about to discover something tremendous!"

"Here people are finally proud of testing their status and knowing the truth! I wish it had always been like this before! So many have died!" said Jugus.

"And stigma! What is the cure for stigma? The same old ways of humans. Stigma was known by those who got pregnant out of wedlock as they called it. Dear Mum endured so much. Stigma suffered by those with a missing eye, foot or ear. Stigma: Being of a

darker skin, poor, having a drunken father, being survivors of poliomyelitis. We protect stigma. Stigma known by lepers. The mentally challenged... anything not seen to be normal. What is normal? Stigma was suffered by children and adults who had tape worm. Aids was unknown then. And then, it came first in thin and dying bodies and then in healthy ones too.”

“I agree but we must get together for ourselves, Amani. We must organize a real do for Joe’s wedding and our many graduations. We have a lot to celebrate, including Joe’s double math degree!”

“I’ll ring Joe just now.” He added, “Wam, Aris and Jwak will be with us! We must have some fun.”

Aris and her family were preparing a trip to Kenya. She was staring at her plane ticket 100100. It reminded her of *matatu* No. 100. Now she could fly at high speed passing many lights like a thousand glow-worms on their journey to some place. There was so much committed to memory.

Jugus put his phone down. He recalled the happy past. He was drawn in by the lonely cry of the night - bird that he could hear. “Whippoorwill, Whippoorwill....” It went. *Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?* He knew that song. That lonely cry made him at home with its familiarity. He did not know that it had punctuated the night of his mother’s life for many years. He had no idea about the intimacy between the bird and his mother. He did not know of the bird’s kisses. The song. That his mother had often slept on it, this lullaby for both the rich and the poor. That Kabi had put the words “Bless our country, help our children, teach us freedom!” to the whippoorwill’s constant cry was in her diary. He did not know that his grandmother Wakabi had told Kabi that the bird spoke of cold but that the question meant there was a search and there would be a finding: *Kwĩ beboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?*

Oh, it is so cold, oh, it is so cold, where shall I sleep? His mother had spent all her life in pursuit for justice and warmth for Kenyalini Village so that the night - bird would stay giving him all hope. He did not know that had been her secret, the song of the bird that sang in

the dark deep of the bush. He did eventually find out that the bird flew to Egypt and other lands of Afrika, flying under the sun moving undeterred where the sun cleans the sky, sears the heavens and no cloud dares cover her. When it does so, the sun sweeps the sky on high so that children of the five continents below may lie under the moon's soft light and not come to harm. And it is hot when she marks her bright path again across the vast equatorial blue sky.

Jugus knew that it is a Nubian bird that knows no borders. That this bird travels. It flies from Kenyan highlands to lowlands and back. The bird that flies to coastlands, to the lakes and to Ethiopia to visit her relatives. The bird that wants to sing more so that the cradle of humanity may be found again in the whole of the earth. He knew that the moon always beamed on that crib, that foundation.

It was as if the song of the night - bird was held in a castanet which let it out each time it released a note like the pods on the trees that break open. Sometimes it sang of sadness with a hearty energy, pining for hope, and delighting at the same time. It was pain in a song that refused to part with joy. It allowed itself to be mocked and opened into sounds for it was ready to be heard. It was possible to pick up the note of hope inside the melancholic song. In there, love, joy and faith, the endless search were stuck as in a beaded and round chain. A round hut of all peoples of all times a galaxy in the universe.

In the horizon, the moon rises gently. First she sends out her soft rays. When her powerful beams strike the ground, rings of hope rise into the air. In the enveloping rays of light that enfold the earth, the five continents are dimly lit. They are in love arrayed. The moon is now fully visible. She grabs her apparel of splendor. Hers is a silver and white skirt pressed around her waist as with a magnet. Silently stars take their places. The moon beams soft colors around and beyond her. She fills the earth. The planet loves her. She pauses and watches the earthly.

Hope that is inseparable from pain, vice and virtue, love and peace is hidden like a nutritious fish of the sea that is held by two hard shells that open in the middle. The moonbeams protect it. They cover it and shine so that the water and salt might preserve it.

There was sun in the banana hands hidden in green leaves to ripen in its rays. The yellowing glow of ripeness, open to bird's pecking when the rain does not fall in time. Birds that eat leaf and flesh happily chat their sense into no sense; but never are able to eat the sun. He knew that this bird had been the secret spirit of the rhythm in Kabi's life. The song of the night - bird came before sunset and moonrise. The night - bird still flies over many, many, many miles over the earth, to give strength of hope and meaning wherever it can. It sang. It sang many songs. It is heard in many nights and days. It touches the source of greatness; sometimes kissing its dearest.

When it sang in Delhi and in Calcutta, *Kñĩ beboĩĩ! kñĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?* Someone recognized its song and run with the spirit. When it sang in Mexico, someone loved its song, and run with its spirit all over the earth. A cold stream was turned warm. *Oye! esta tan frío, tan frío esta Madre, donde duermo?* "Kñĩ beboĩĩ! kñĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?" Kabi's spirit heard the response all over the earth.

That Kabi was somewhere and everywhere Jugus knew very well. How would all her energy have disappeared? She was there. Look. She could see the whole Rift Valley. She walked with the moon. She

took the bones of the ribs, skulls and legs of the woman and put them together. Children run there to see. They were all stars dressed in light despite their rough sides. She could see Nakupenda and Malaika there. Kabi's eyes were wide and beautifully opened.

Her eyelashes were so long that they curled back and her eyes were like large seas of hope, love and compassion. Work. She gathered the bones of the old men. She put them there and saw that they had no ribs missing.

They were all stars darkened and fallen but lit up by the light of the moon. The burnt children began to speak. She looked at them. The moon was weeping. The children said. "We are the eternal fire, and you shall never again close our eyes. We love our people!"

Googo's wrinkled smile hit the earth in rays. The dry hot earth cracked with her breath in many places when her lips parted sweetly. She seemed to say, "Let the Ũkabi, the Maasai and all peoples, sing forever."

Some tourists sat outside a camp in the basin of the Rift Valley. They were planning to go bird watching. They were feeling cold. It was chilly. The sun had gone down.

"Mamma," said a young voice. "Mamma. Sing me real songs. Tell me real stories. Let us see real people... Something is blinding me, Mamma! I want to tour my real self," She said in German.

"I will tell you more tomorrow"

"No. Now Mother. Please!"

"Listen... it is a night - bird that sings only in human language, the tongue and ear of all human beings," Her mother said.

In the distance some men were singing in rejoinder. They were chanting Maasai tunes. *Eeeee yaaaahm, uhbbbh eeeyaaah*, they intoned. There were voices of women rising again. The men sang women. The moon and the sun echoed their songs.

Somewhere far away drum skins were cracking in the sun. They sang without any visible hands beating them. The people: children, men and women danced to the rhythm. And again far away the song of the night – bird could be heard in the supra lingua of all languages.

For the sun burns all odium. She moves undeterred. She cleans the sky. The sun sears the heavens. No cloud dares cover her. She sweeps the firmament on high so that children below may lie under the moon's soft light and not come to harm. She marks her bright path again across the vast equatorial azure. Her signature is mild and beautiful in all songs all leaves, flowers and waters. She shimmers in the sea.

When the powerful beams of the moon strike the waters, rings of hope rise into the air. The moon is now fully visible. Hers is a silver and white skirt pressed around her waist as with a magnet. She unfolds her apparel. Her rays spread everywhere. Silently stars take their places. The moon beams soft colors around and beyond her. She fills the earth. The planet loves her. She pauses and watches the earthly. Nature sings. None can understand any tongue without loving all tones, no faith without all faiths:

"Si sic algeat, sic algeat, ubi sum ad somnum?"

"Kwĩ heboĩ! kwĩ bebo ngũkomakũ?"

"Oh di place cole oh! Oh di place too cole. Oosai a go sleep?"

"Vuveri ooh, Ohh vuchindo vuveeho mno, Ningone hena vudiko?"

Oye! esta tan frio, tan frio esta Madre, donde duermo?"

"Wololo koyo ng'ich, wololo koyo ng'ich! Abiro nindo kanye?"

"Oh, kɛ bhishon thaandaa, kɛ bhishon thaandaa, kothaay gbumote jaai?"

"Koyoni ngich, yawa koyoni ngich manade ti anind kure?"

"Wai! Ana sanyi sosai. Wai! Ana sanyi sosai. Ina zan konta?"

"Wenn es so kalt ist, so kalt ist, wo werde ich schlafen?"

"THE AUTHOR'S WORK IS AN INVITATION TO OPEN THE MIND. PHILO IKONYA'S BOOKS ARE A PLEASURE TO READ. SHE USES HUMOUR TO COUNTER THE BLEAK SIDE OF LIFE."

HELMUTH A NIEDERLE, PEN PRESIDENT, AUSTRIA

"PHILO IKONYA'S POETIC SENSE COMES THROUGH STRONGLY IN THE NARRATIVE, ADDING SUBTLE LAYERS OF MEANING."

**ANN MORGAN ON KENYA, WILL YOU MARRY ME?
(AYEAROFREADINGTHEWORLD.COM)**

Do we live inside the breasts of our mothers? In the mind and hearts of two women, indeed at their breasts a nation lives. The whole universe is in the lives of the people Philo writes about. They hear the song of the nightjar and it has meaning. Inside a mother's chest her daughter hangs like a silent unvenerated Pieta. "Wakabi has eyes inside her breast. She sees from inside there. She knows this story well..." A country's literature is rooted in its history. But when history is full of hardship can authors create books pregnant with optimism? *In Still Sings the Nightbird* Philo Ikonya defies the currents of hopelessness to point her readers to a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel of nightmares. Out of the lonely cry of a nightjar, the rape of Kabi and indeed of Kenya, appears a light beaming into a brighter future.

PHILO IKONYA is a Kenyan poet and novelist. She is known for speaking out against injustice and corruption. She has written extensively on governance, mass poverty and post-election violence in Kenya. She was arrested several times, and brutally in 2009, for speaking out. She lives in exile in Norway. She is an avid blogger and journalist. She has been a teacher, lecturer and editor. She speaks Kiswahili, English, Spanish, Norwegian and understands Italian. Philo Ikonya is the author of *Kenya, Will You Marry Me?* (Langaa, 2011). *Leading the Night* and three books of poetry.



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